

An Interview With

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Washington Post Service

Paris

The top North Vietnamese at the Paris peace talks said yesterday that the prisoner of war issue, properly coupled with a total American withdrawal, could be settled while the Thieu-Ky regime is still in power in Saigon.

He indicated however, that Hanoi will not agree if the United States intends to continue to arm and support the South Vietnamese forces.

These points emerged during a 90-minute interview with Xuan Thuy, chief of the North Vietnamese delegation, at his suburban Paris headquarters, Choisy-le-Roi. The veteran diplomat answered questions with a minimum of the political polemics familiar at the weekly meetings in the Paris forum.

QUESTION — You have said the United States should fix a "reasonable" date for complete and unconditional withdrawal of "all" American forces. Would you clarify the word "all"?

ANSWER — When I use the word "all" I mean the totality of U.S. forces in Vietnam. It includes all kinds of arms — ground, air, naval forces — on the territory, air space, water of Vietnam including U.S. military personnel, American military advisers . . . We don't have any objections if U.S. planes are based in foreign countries, provided they are not used against Vietnam. The Seventh Fleet may be located on the high seas provided it does not violate Vietnamese territorial waters or is not used against Vietnam.

The reference to planes

Hanoi's Man

in Paris

based in foreign countries was in response to a query about the U.S. Air Force in Thailand. When he was reminded that his spokesman, Nguyen Than Le, who was present at the interview, last week had mentioned American use of both Japan and Okinawa, Xuan Thuy said that was because they had been used in the war against Vietnam.

His response to the question also included a statement that it is "the scheme of the Nixon administration to seize not only South Vietnam but also to control Laos and Cambodia for the implementation of U.S. policy in these countries and also for encircling the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam and also to hold in the American grasp the whole area of Southeast Asia."

Q — Does the word also include both any form so-called residual force and a military training and assistance group?

A — These military personnel are included in the word "all."

Q — Does the word also include the forces of South Korea, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand now in South Vietnam?

A — Yes.

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Q — When you say that if a "reasonable" date is set for total withdrawal and then the question of American prisoners could be "rapidly" and "easily" settled, are you speaking of those held only in North Vietnam or also in the south, in Laos and in Cambodia?

Xuan Thuy said he was speaking of those held in both North and South Vietnam, since the Provisional

Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (Viet Cong) had first proposed that the U.S. set a withdrawal date and the PRG was speaking only of the south. He had added the north. As to Laos, Pathet Lao Prince Souphanouvong has said those captured will be released when all bombing of Laos is stopped. As to Cambodia, that comes under the competence of Prince Sihanouk, Xuan Thuy said.

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Q—If President Nixon set a withdrawal date to your satisfaction, would the prisoners be immediately released, released only after the end of withdrawal or concurrently at the same pace as withdrawal?

A—I cannot answer for the time being, for this is the key to settlement. As long as Nixon does not set a date, we cannot go into details of a settlement. The question of prisoners relates to the aftermath, the consequences of war, so all questions should be settled first. But we have shown flexibility . . .

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Q—Since you know American opinion is much concerned about the prisoners, why do you not offer to release all of them once Mr. Nixon has set a total withdrawal date to your specifications?

A—If I did that, I would be working for Mr. Nixon and not the Vietnamese people and not for world peace, because Mr. Nixon wants to use the prisoners for bargaining and to cover up his dark schemes. I should take into account the American public but also what the Vietnamese are thinking about the U.S.

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Q—What would you consider a "reasonable" date for withdrawal, given the logistic problem — six months, nine months, one year from

the date of an announcement?

A—"A reasonable date was proposed by the PRG" which, he noted, on Sept. 17, 1970, had proposed withdrawal by June 30, 1971. "But Nixon did not agree. Let him propose a date. He should set it."

When asked if the PRG timetable of just over nine months was reasonable, he replied that "I don't mention any period of time now. Now I'm not willing to mention any time." He recalled that Mr. Nixon had proposed withdrawal in 12 months, but Xuan Thuy did not mention that that was a call for North Vietnamese withdrawal from the south as well. Leaning forward, Xuan Thuy went on to say that the seas and the air are "under U. S. control," the U. S. has lots of ships and planes and that retired Marine General David Shoup had said it would take ten days to prepare withdrawal and 15 more to withdraw. ★ ★ ★

Q—You have repeatedly referred to "Two crucial questions" involved in settling the Vietnam problem, the military and the political questions, and have said they are "inseparable" (a statement he had made again at the June 3 Paris meeting). The political question has been posed as removing the Thieu-Ky regime from office and the formation of a coalition government. Is this political issue also a condition for prisoner release?

A—The question of the release of prisoners is related only to the military question. This shows our flexibility. It should have been linked to the political question.

Q—But what does "inseparable" mean then?

A—If we speak of the whole question of Vietnam, of the settlement of the war, ending U. S. aggression, then the military and political

questions should be linked. But if a reasonable date is set the question of prisoners may be settled.

Q—Why do you say "may" and not "will"?

A—Yes, you can put it down "will be settled." From now on it is "will."

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Q—You know Mr. Nixon has said you have offered only to discuss prisoner release.

A—Nixon is unwilling to withdraw. Therefore he tries to use one pretext and another. Nixon's allegation about discussing and not settling is because he is unwilling to settle. He wants to split hairs. ★ ★ ★

Q—Still, given a satisfactory withdrawal date, the prisoner issue will be settled even if Thieu and Ky are still in power in Saigon and there

is no political settlement?

A—Right. Moreover this has been laid down in point one of the PRG program of September, 1970.

Q—How automatic would prisoner release be once a satisfactory withdrawal date is set?

A—Let Nixon set the date and we will discuss that.

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Q—Since you have said withdrawal and prisoner release could be accomplished while Thieu and Ky are still in power, what about military and economic aid from the U.S. to their regime afterward?

A—That is the point of linking political and military questions. . . . It should also settle the question of the Saigon administration, because suppose the U.S. withdraws but it maintains the Saigon

administration and continues to give it military aid and that administration continues to repress the people of the South. We would return to the period prior to the introduction of the American expeditionary force. It is what we call neo-colonialism, and the U.S. would remain involved in Vietnam.

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Q—Then as a condition for prisoner release there must be no such continuing military and economic aid?

Xuan Thuy avoided a direct answer. After the question had been put three times in various forms, he said that "I think you should read again the PRG's eight points. It is clearer than my explanation." When the interviewer said the eight points were not all that clear, he took another tack.

Diplomat

Xuan

Thuy

