U. S. Envoy Is Top Defender of Thieu

By Jack Anderson and Les Whitten

It's difficult to determine whether Graham Martin, the American ambassador to South Vietnam, is working for the United States or for Nguyen Van Thieu's government.

The ascerbic Martin, whose undiplomatic outbursts have become legendary, has been in constant hot water with Congress for his staunch defense of the Thieu regime.

One of his cables to the State Department, for example, suggested it would be the "height of folly" to give "an honest and detailed answer" to questions from Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) about foreign aid.

We have now obtained Martin's cables on the issue of political prisoners. He received instructions, which went out to embassies around the world, to determine whether local leaders had been jailed for "political purposes."

Characteristically, Martin accepted as gospel the South Vietnamese government's denials that it held any political prisoners. Yet the State Department specifically instructed him not to go to his host government for the prisoner information.

Cabled Martin: "The GVN (Government of Vietnam) has for over a year been the target of a well-coordinated campaign to tar it with the political prisoner brush.

"The central theme, ceaselessly repeated in the press and other publications circulating in the U.S. and Western Europe is that the GVN is detaining 200,000 persons solely for their opposition to the Thieu administration. The charge is not true."

How did he know? He had asked the Thieu government, which had told him so. Continued Martin:

"The embassy has received scores of letters from members of Congress, from U.S. citizens and from organizations like Amnesty International demanding release of alleged political prisoners. In many cases, the correspondents name the prisoner in question. The embassy has checked many of these names with the Ministry of Interior. We have yet to find a documented case of a 'political prisoner.' "

Yet remarkably, visiting U.S. lawmakers have succeeded in locating several prisoners who have been jailed and tortured for opposing Thieu. Indeed, Martin tried to obstruct the legislators from getting the truth about the prisoners.

For example, three House members—Don Fraser (D-Minn.), Bella Abzug (D-N.Y.), and Millicent Fenwick (R-N.J.)—interviewed a prisoner named Huynh Tan Mam who had been thrown in the slammer for allegedly conspiring with Communists. He had been tortured so badly that he had to be hauled into court on a stretcher.

Mam swore to the Americans that he was not guilty of the charges against him. He had been beaten badly, he said, in the presence of South Vietnamese officials. As the three legislators started to leave, Mam slipped them a letter written in blood.

A Fraser aide, Robert Boettcher, spoke with a girl who said she had been picked up "at random" from a marketplace crowd and had been imprisoned for eight months. She had been accused of being a Communist and had been tortured.

During a meeting with President Thieu, Rep. Fraser requested permission to visit the 18 journalists who were recently jailed. He wanted to see them in private, he said, without any government officials present.

Thieu hemmed and hawed, but Ambassador Martin agreed to make the arrangements. But when Fraser showed up at police headquarters, he was given three ground rules:

(1) He was not to discuss controversial issues with the prisoners; (2) he could ask them only for their names, dates of birth and state of health; and (3) he would be accompanied by government officials.

Fraser was so incensed, according to eyewitnesses, that he "got red in the face" and dispatched an aide to contact Graham Martin. Back came the aide with word that Martin hadn't even bothered to make arrangements.

The Saigon embassy has assured the State Department, by telegram, meanwhile, that denunciation of the Thieu regime in print "is solid evidence that Saigon press continues to exercise very substantial measure of press freedom."

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