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U.S. Viet Diplomacy Is Called Futile

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The Ford administration acknowledged yesterday that all diplomatic attempts to halt the onrush of Communist forces in South Vietnam "have been futile so far."

As the South Vietnamese government's zone of control continued to shrink alarmingly, U.S. officials sought to keep alive the hope that diplomacy ultimately might help to check the Communist advance. The best prospect they could offer, however, was that the Ford administration will continue to search for all possible openings for a new diplomatic approach.

At Palm Springs, Calif., White House press secretary Ron Nessen issued a claim, which he later had to correct, that the United States is engaged in "continuing diplomatic initiatives" to obtain a negotiated settlement of the war.

At midday, Nessen said: "There have been and are ongoing diplomatic efforts to have a settlement but all these efforts have been futile so far."

In fact, only the latter part of the statement was correct, conceding futility. The Nessen statement directly conflicted with a simultaneous acknowledgment at the State Department that no diplomatic initiatives are currently under way because, it was said, North Vietnam is engaged solely on a military course of action, which is "a massive violation" of the 1973 cease-fire accord.

Nessen was obliged to issue a retraction six hours later, which served to underscore the sense of futility inside the administration.

From Palm Springs, Washington Post Staff Writer Lou Cannon reported last night, Nessen said his error was inadvertent.

"I was misinformed on this subject

today by a member of the National Security Council staff," said Nessen, "and as a result you were given some inaccurate information."

"At the moment," said Nessen, "there are no new diplomatic initiatives under way in the narrow sense. Of course we seek full implementation of the Paris (cease-fire) accords by North Vietnam and we have stated that publicly and often. We have tried through normal diplomatic channels to persuade North Vietnam to live up to the accords. These efforts so far have been unsuccessful."

"So the record will be accurate, these diplomatic efforts should not be construed as new diplomatic initiatives."

Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib told reporters in Washington that the United States will seek to reassess the situation and attempt to devise new diplomatic initiatives when President Ford's special emissary, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, returns from Saigon later this week.

The North Vietnamese, Habib said, by their military actions "have disavowed their diplomatic obligations."

Under these conditions, said Habib, "The feeling [in the administration] is that until the military situation is stabilized they will not be diverted from that course. That is the historical record with this kind of situation."

Just how the military situation in South Vietnam is going to be "stabilized," however, was the question that no U.S. official could answer.

Habib said he "anticipates" that President Ford will ask Congress to vote "substantial funds" for military and economic aid to South Vietnam, if the President concludes that the Saigon government has the capacity to "stabilize the military situation."

In Palm Springs, where Mr. Ford

golfed for a third consecutive day under clear desert skies, at the Thunderbird County Club, Cannon reported, Nessen reacted sharply to what he appeared to regard as inferences that the President was golfing while South Vietnam burned.

Mr. Ford usually available to accompanying reporters for comments on almost any subject, has gone to special lengths during his Palm Springs vacation to avoid questions about Vietnam.

"I don't know that his personal activities have any effect on the military situation in Vietnam," Nessen told reporters, adding: "Would it prevent anything from happening in Vietnam if he didn't play golf?"

Nessen said the President would respond to questions about Vietnam at his press conference in San Diego on Thursday (3 p.m. EDT). Originally one of a series of conferences scheduled only for regional television coverage, this conference will be nationally televised.

The Ford administration apparently is attempting to moderate its policy of centering blame on Congress for the catastrophe unfolding in South Vietnam.

Nessen yesterday objected to some news stories which he felt overstated his remarks Monday, in which he blamed North Vietnamese violations of the Paris cease-fire accords and congressional failure to approve sufficient military aid for the massive withdrawals by the South Vietnamese army.

Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger on Monday also said his comments about congressional culpability had been misinterpreted, and Habib yesterday told reporters, "I don't like to use phrases like 'blaming Congress.'"