

WXPost APR 20 1975

A City on the Brink

Fear Blurs Saigon Reality

By Philip A. McCombs
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, April 19—"The battle for this capital could begin tonight, tomorrow, in two weeks," said a South Vietnamese army major. "Nobody knows exactly when, but many will die and the destruction will be enormous. There will be panic and terror. I guess at the last minute I'll try to climb on a boat like everyone else and get away."

A moment later the man seems to contradict himself. "There still is a small chance to hold Saigon if there is no panic," he said. "But the goddamn Americans could mess things up with an evacuation. Ah well, I no longer understand what is happening."

Saigon is a city that seems about to explode. At this point, the tension, fear and uncertainty here have risen to such a pitch that virtually

no one is sure of anything except that some sort of grim and speedy demise seems imminent.

Several days of interviews with Vietnamese officials, Western diplomats, well-placed observers and ordinary citizens indicate that many—even those who were formerly the coolest of ana-

News Analysis

lysts—are losing their grip on reality, and those who still maintain some national view are often psychologically unable to face its implications.

"Everything is bizarre," said a senior diplomat. "The Americans are bizarre because they have no policy here any more. The Communists, who could have invaded and captured Saigon

See SAIGON, A14, Col. 7

SAIGON, From A1

a week ago, are behaving strangely because for some reason they haven't done it yet. The behavior of the Thieu government has been extremely bizarre, and so has that of the Chinese and the Russians. Who knows what is happening?"

Sources paint a picture of U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin as an exhausted and somewhat confused man who even until a few days ago was "optimistic" that some sort of successful defense of Saigon could be mounted. Now Martin is said to be wavering, but still unsure about whether he should try to get President Thieu to leave the country in hopes that a successor government would be able to negotiate some sort of advantageous surrender to the Communists, perhaps dressed up under the terms of the Paris cease-fire agreement.

Martin's own embassy appears to be exploding under him. For weeks, Rebellious American diplomats have been leaking extensive information to the press in hopes that the seriousness of the situation will be borne home in Washington with full force. Often the leaks have been to reporters whom Martin has snubbed and tried to deny information in the past.

On the other hand, the ambassador is said to be in an impossible position because any public move of his that showed lack of confidence in the future of South Vietnam could have a devastating effect. Martin is portrayed by sources as being in deep personal anguish over the fate of American citizens here and that of the tens of thousands of Vietnamese who have cooperated with the United States and who do not want to live under communism.

The plight of these people is now desperate. The embassy here has raised hopes by compiling lists of those who might be evacuated, but the most sober view is that if there is an emergency in Saigon, the United States will get out its own citizens and leave behind the Vietnamese.

The specter is raised, by well-placed observers, of Americans climbing aboard helicopters and flying away while U.S. Marines push away and possibly gun down their frantic and enraged former allies.

One factor that makes this scenario possible and—some say—probable, is the sheer weight of numbers. While it has been commonplace to speak of the "tens of thousands" of Vietnamese who may want to flee here, the actual numbers may be in the hundreds of thousands or even millions.

"You have to realize that there are just a hell of a lot of Vietnamese who don't want to live under the Communists," said a well-placed Vietnamese observer. "If you really gave them a chance, there might be millions who would leave." Panic might also spur many to leave.

To many informed observers, such a proposition is simply impossible. As things stand now, a few thou-

sand Vietnamese, at most, might be evacuated, and even that seems improbable. Many Vietnamese and Americans admit this possibility, and they tend to see it as possibly the final American mistake and betrayal here.

There are Vietnamese leaving, however, as the current embassy push to get Americans out of town continues and as those Americans take their Vietnamese wives and children with them. Of 8,000 Americans in Vietnam a few weeks ago, fewer than 3,800 remain today, according to a U.S. embassy spokesman. There are no figures on how many Vietnamese dependents went with the Americans who have departed.

The large American compound at Tansonnhut airport today had become a center for departing Americans and their Vietnamese dependents. A large modern movie theater just below the windows of the office where Gen. William Westmoreland and Gen. Creighton Abrams ran the American war was today a scene of evacuation.

Hundreds of people stood in line or sat in rows of chairs waiting for Vietnamese and U.S. officials to complete the paperwork that would enable them to leave the country.

The Vietnamese officials were there following U.S. pressure on the government to let Vietnamese wives and children of Americans depart without passports.

Congressional pressure to get Americans out of Vietnam apparently led to this, and the government was

convinced that to get Congressional economic and military aid it would have to eliminate the red tape that for weeks has kept the Vietnamese dependents of Americans from leaving.

Now families board a bus at the U.S. embassy downtown, are taken to Tansonnhut, processed, and placed on a plane—all in a day or two.

The Vietnamese are given papers that admit them to the United States on a temporary basis. Presumably, they will be given permanent status once they arrive. The U.S. Air Force planes

fly their passengers to the United States with several stops in between, but no one is allowed to get off before arrival in the United States.

The French embassy here has been meeting with personalities of the "Third Force," which includes politicians and groups that favor neither the government nor the Communists, in hopes that some sort of political settlement can be found.

It appears to observers that this attempt has so far yielded no significant results and may be more of a goodwill effort by the French than a serious diplomatic endeavor.

Third Force leader Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh held a press conference recently in which he called for the departure of President Thieu. Minh or some other figure may head some post-servers here feel that any such government could only be formed to surrender in the same way to the Communists.

In any case, it is not clear that Thieu will step aside, although reports are confusing on this point. Thieu is said by reliable sources to be remaining inside his palace, sticking mostly to his office there, fearful that if he goes outside of it he might be killed by political rivals.

According to some reports, Thieu is seriously considering leaving South Vietnam and has had long discussions on the subject with a few intimates. Some members of his extended family have reportedly already left the country by air for Taiwan, although his wife is said to remain.

Other sources see Thieu as determined to stay until the bitter end. They portray him as convinced that if South Vietnam has any chance of beating off a final Communist assault on Saigon, he must remain the country's leader.

The great imponderable in all this remains the intent of the Communists. It is generally thought that they could have ridden the wave of panic that they created in capturing the northern two-thirds of the country on into Saigon perhaps a week or two ago.

No one is quite sure why they did not do it. There are several theories. Perhaps they were not logistically or psychologically prepared for their stunning successes, or perhaps they preferred to force a political settlement to spare themselves the trouble and possible international disapproval of a direct military conquest of Saigon.

The grimmiest assessment—which many fear may turn out to be the correct one—is that the Communists could drive into Saigon any time they wish, creating panic that would disable the government and give them a quick, total victory.

"At this point it is hard to see how any political solution will be forthcoming," said a pessimist. "They are so close to victory that, no matter what their reservations, the temptation must be overwhelming."