

Saigon in Hurried Search For Offer Acceptable to VC

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SAIGON, April 23—Diplomats, politicians and generals worked feverishly Wednesday in an effort to find a political solution acceptable to the Communists, whose divisions are now gathering in the provinces outside the capital.

Vietnam's new president Tran Van Huong accepted resignation of Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can Wednesday in the first step of a now desperate attempt to form a new government.

The prevailing view among many American and Western diplomats, and also among many Vietnamese is that the North Vietnamese have virtually won the war and that all that is left is to mask surrender with some sort of coalition that would avoid either a last battle in

the streets of Saigon or a nightmare panic and the breakdown of all order. There is no indication here yet that the Communist will accept compromise. Radio Hanoi has called the present political maneuverings "the dance of the puppets" and the Vietcong representatives in Paris have rejected the latest South Vietnamese offer to negotiate, as long as the United States is still supporting the war. 23 APR

The Foreign Ministry, in a statement Wednesday, had offered to discuss "all issues within the framework of the Paris agreement . . . including the establishment of a National Council for Reconciliation and Concord."

The council, as envisaged in the 1973 Paris pact, would prepare for new national elections. It would be made up of members of the Sai-

gon government, the Vietcong and independent "third force" politicians. Thieu had persistently refused to discuss the council, contending that it would lead to a coalition government with the Communists.

But there is still some hope here that the Communists would prefer to take the temporary coalition road to final victory rather than take Saigon by storm.

The Americans are working hard behind the scenes for such a solution but events are moving now with sudden speed. Those who have spoken with President Huong, have not found that he is capable of either quick or decisive action.

The American ambassador, Graham Martin, has met with the French Ambassador. See VIETNAM, A10, Col. 4

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sador, Jean-Marie Merillon, in the past days in an effort to enlist French help. The French have been in contact with the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government representatives in Paris and there is talk here of trying to get a list of acceptable Saigon personalities for a coalition. But according to well informed diplomatic sources, the PRG have not yet obliged the French by stating whom they would deal with in a coalition.

Huong summoned the French ambassador to the palace. Various so-called "third force" candidates, such as Duong Van (Big) Minh, who led the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, met round the clock with generals, politicians and the leaders of religious sects.

[A group of 17 deputies in the National As-

sembly, members of the opposition Nation Society, issued a statement calling for the installation of Minh as president, wire services reported. Another member of the antigovernment alliance, militant Roman Catholic priest Tran Huu Thanh, whose anticorruption movement has long called for a total change of leadership, urged Huong to form a "Cabinet of national salvation" within two days or "we will act on our own."]

Meanwhile, the comparative lull in the fighting continued.

South Vietnamese commanders moved the government's warplanes out of Bienhoa in the face of an expected Communist assault on the big air base 15 miles northeast of Saigon. Government helicopter pilots reported sighting a large convoy of Communist troops traveling near Bienhoa in a column of Soviet-built Molotova trucks.

Unlike the Cambodian insurgents, who in the last weeks were only five miles or so from Phnom Penh, the North Vietnamese have tanks, anti-aircraft guns and missiles as well as long-range artillery. If Saigon's troops lose the battle on the outer perimeter, it will be all over for Saigon.

The British, Australians and West Germans are already closing their embassies and taking out as many Vietnamese as want to go.

[Thailand will withdraw all remaining personnel attached to the Thai embassy in Saigon on Thursday, Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan said in Bangkok.]

Vietnamese sources said that the Americans had promised to evacuate the families of key police and military officers who were in a position to keep the evacuation process at the airport going full tilt.

Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces have been in position for 48 hours to overrun Saigon, Western intelligence sources said Wednesday, according to the Associated Press. The sources speculated that the Communist side is delaying a final kill while it watches the rapidly moving political events in Saigon.

A hand grenade exploded in a black market stall in Saigon Wednesday night, killing three Vietnamese women and injuring three other persons. It is not immediately known if it was a terror attack.

The North Vietnam News Agency, quoting Vietcong officials, said the Vietcong captured two South Vietnamese generals in Phanrang, capital of the coastal province of Ninhthuan, in recent fighting.

A visit to the northeastern front Wednesday found conditions relatively peaceful with less artillery and mortar rounds coming in on government positions than before. Military sources said that Communist pressure in the south, along Highway 4 to the Mekong Delta, had decreased somewhat as well. But whether the Communists were deliberately halting their advance to watch political events, or whether they were simply gathering forces for another strike, was not known.

The Communist tactic so far has been to gradually surround Saigon and increase pressure on the city slowly—not unlike the method the Cambodian insurgents used in Phnom Penh. Whether that tactic will continue is unknown.

But military sources stress that the battle for Saigon will be fought some distance from the city—perhaps 20 to 30 miles away.