

Fear of the Unknown in a Dying City

Saigon Tension Brings Exhaustion, Tortured Dreams

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SAIGON, April 24 — When evening comes to Saigon, foreigners still gather on the open-sided terrace of the old-fashioned French colonial hotel, the Continental Palace, to drink an aperitif as they have done for 50 years. The lights begin to come on, the waiters in white suits take orders and the slow fans on the high ceilings bring some relief in the tropical heat.

But when the hour of the curfew comes, and it now comes at 8 p.m., the customers begin to wander away from the little tables and wicker chairs and strange and even terrifying shapes begin to gather in the darkness outside.

It is the hour when beggars, cripples, prostitutes, junkies and transvestites

become desperate for one last pitch. There are children, dirty and uncared for whose only foreign words are "you, you, you give me money," and girls, some of them vacuous with narcotics, all of them begging, pleading, pulling at the last of the customers before the night and the curfew take all the foreigners away.

There have always been beggars and whores hanging around the Continental. Saigon, in that regard, is no worse than many other Asian cities. It is the desperation that is different and terrifying.

The desperation of the beggars is less controlled but no greater than the desperation of a great portion of this city. There is an air of intolerant fear that pervades all contacts and all conversations now, a fear of the un-

known, of what will come and a realization that when the Communists come, for better or worse everyone's life will change forever.

Here are a few impressions and thoughts on what it is like to live here now in a dying city—a city that has always depended too much on foreigners — corrupt, venal, energetic and colorful in the last year of a 30-year civil war.

Saigon was built by the French and married to the Americans and when the new rulers come, whether it is in six days or six months, they will be harsh and intolerant.

You can see the underlying tension in the way people behave and the puffy, drawn look of people's faces.

See SAIGON, A22, Col. 1

SAIGON, From A1

One friend recently bought some poison to give himself and his children. When the time came, he couldn't, and so he gave his children away to distant relatives who, unlike himself, had never worked with Americans.

Another friend has been offered passage to America by his employers. He was told that he could bring only his wife and his children. In the Confucian tradition of the extended family this is intolerable to him.

"One can have many children but only one mother," he said. "Only savage people would leave their mothers behind."

Sleep is shallow in Saigon these days and Vietnamese and foreigners complain of exhaustion beyond fatigue, quick tears and tortured dreams. The tension seems to produce irrational behavior in some. A few days ago, for example, a man stabbed himself to death in front of the National Assembly. Perhaps it was a political protest of some kind, but the reaction of several Vietnamese was that it was not an entirely abnormal thing to do.

Many Vietnamese, a large number of whom have not thought it out clearly, will

do anything to leave the country and escape to America. It is possible to call an acquaintance one day and have him gone the next without saying a word. The American embassy has simplified the paper work to such an extent that Americans can take out virtually any Vietnamese with them and every day the great silver Air Force planes circle the city impatiently waiting to land, load and take off again for Guam or the Philippines.

There has been none of the expected trouble with the Vietnamese authorities over getting Vietnamese and Americans out, but, in what will perhaps be the last corruption of the war, the Americans have offered to take out all the officers who could make it difficult to evacuate via the airport, including police and air force officers, along with their families.

Although there is a strong undercurrent of anti-American feeling here now, the more sensational news stories about overt anti-Americanism have been vastly exaggerated. Americans still meet with courtesy and consideration in Saigon. But the undercurrent is there and the nightmare which the American embassy faces is that one day the population will turn on Americans in rage at being abandoned.

If anything, the tension has risen a notch in the last two days since President

Nguyen Van Thieu's resignation. No one knows what will happen now and there is something manic in the way young men ride their Hondas on the Saigon streets. Public services, such as the telephone seem to be less and less workable.

Foreign embassies are closing one after the other.

"The diplomats are going out all over Indochina," one of them said. The Germans are gone, the British hauled down the Union Jack today and the Australians are all but gone with much of their equipment shipped home.

In the past week ashes from papers burning in chancery gardens have been blowing in the wind. The more modern embassies have shredding machines.

If one dines with diplomats at home, one is likely to find a table, a few chairs and nothing else in vast, empty rooms. Furniture has long ago left but there is usually a little wine or champagne left.

Despite the panic, there are many Vietnamese who have no intention of leaving the country.

"Perhaps it is better if you take away all the war profiteers, the secret policemen and interrogators," one friend said. "We Vietnamese

make very bad exiles, we are not as bad as the Russians, who cry even more than we do because of homesickness. But we are not like the Chinese who can get along and prosper anywhere."

There are none of the inconveniences yet that marked the last days of Phnom Penh. There are no power cuts and, so far, food and supplies are still coming into the capital overland and by sea. But the guns can be heard in the night now.

The North Vietnamese sing songs of vigor, honor and sacrifice for the revolution. Perhaps they are required to sing these songs. Sometimes they write poetry in their diaries that shows the streak of melancholy in the Vietnamese soul.

Many South Vietnamese sing the songs of Trinh Cong Son, whose music is banned on the state radio.

"When the war is over in my country old mothers will head for the mountains to look for their sons' remaining bones," is the way one song goes.