

Offer By Huong

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SAIGON, April 26 (Saturday)—South Vietnamese President Tran Van Huong said Saturday he would step down and turn power over to Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh if the National Assembly agreed in a formal vote that he should do so.

Meanwhile, it was learned that the resignation of President Nguyen Van Thieu and the flurry of activity to arrange a political solution to the war has largely been the result of a North Vietnamese overture to the United States.

In his speech to a joint session of the South Vietnamese legislature, Huong suggested that as an alternative to turning power over to Minh, the legislature could give Huong himself a vote of confidence to appoint a new premier in order to set up a Cabinet for negotiations.

Minh has said he will not join any government headed by Huong and made up of former associates of Thieu.

President Huong told the legislature he had become president in accordance with the constitution—he was Thieu's vice president—and that he did not think the presidency should be given to another person "like a handkerchief."

He said negotiations would be the primary duty of any new government that he might form but that negotiations did not mean surrender. If he had intended to surrender, he said, he would never have accepted the presidency. He said he would prefer to fight to the death rather than surrender.

In a sharp attack on the United States, Huong declared: "We have now been abandoned by the United States and it is clear our friends do not want to help us anymore. We now have no other choice but to negotiate."

The Communists have made it very clear that they will not deal with Huong any government he might form because he has been too closely connected with Thieu's policies.

Although the Communists not specifi-

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cally said they would negotiate with a government headed by Minh, they have allowed diplomats and Vietnamese to believe he would be acceptable.

The prevailing view among diplomats and a growing number of Vietnamese is that the constitution will have to be "bent" as one diplomat put it, to meet the present emergency. It is widely believed here that the Communists are holding up their advance on Saigon in order to give the Saigon government time to come up with an acceptable political formula for negotiations.

After Huong's address, the legislature began debating the President's proposals.

The Communist initiative for a coalition, which informed sources said was transmitted to the Americans through the Polish and Hungarian delegations of the International Commission of Control and Supervision here, and perhaps also through French channels, demanded the resignation of Thieu and the establishment of a tripartite coalition government.

[AP quoted a high government official as saying Friday night that a South Vietnamese Cabinet minister had met with North Vietnamese representatives and had been ordered by President Tran Van Huong to fly to Hanoi to continue the contacts. The official said the minister tried to fly to Hanoi aboard a U.S. Air Force plane but did not receive permission from North Vietnamese authorities.]

The Communist initiative, which sources described as an ultimatum, comes as all talk of a military stabilization of the situation is clearly recognized as hopeless for the Saigon government. The Communist divisions are too many and with many senior South Vietnamese officers sending their families abroad, there is little confidence that the South Vietnamese army could hold the line for more than a few days.

It is understood that the Communists indicated their willingness to hold back their advance on Saigon for a few days to have their demands met, but no firm deadline was given.

[Australian Foreign Minister Donald R. Willesee said in Washington that "very obviously North Vietnam is standing off" in its offensive against Saigon.]

The Communist initiative was followed Thursday by a Vietcong radio broadcast which spelled out their demands in the clearest language to date. 24 APR

The Communists did not say who among Saigon's political personalities they would accept in a government formed to conduct talks. But it is clear to the U.S. embassy here that Minh would be acceptable as leader of the Saigon element in the tripartite government.

The Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government would be a second element, and a third element would be composed of "sober-minded patriots who take neither side," as the PRG radio statement phrased it Thursday. The Communists have made it clear, at least in the U.S. embassy view, that this third element would be chosen by the PRG alone.

There are no illusions that such a political solution would be anything more than a prelude to complete Communist control. But that solution is preferable to the Americans to the bloodshed of an all-out attack and the humiliation of Americans being forced out of Saigon at gunpoint.

From the Communist point of view, a political takeover would also be pre-

ferable to a shootout in the streets of Saigon that would destroy much of the city and cause an international spectacle.

There is some indication that the Communists would allow a nominally independent South Vietnamese state to exist, "as sort of a Vichy state under their control," as one diplomat put it, until final reunification could take place.

The secret Communist messages transmitted to the Americans have made it clear that the time frame for a political solution is short, however, sources said.

One message was delivered last Saturday or Sunday, and it demanded the resignation of Thieu by Wednesday. ¹⁹ It also ^{AR} laid out stringent terms for Communist acceptance of a tripartite government. ²³ _{APR}

The Paris cease-fire agreement of 1973 provided for a tripartite electoral commission, but the Communists always insisted that this should really be an "administrative structure" or de facto government, a point that was never satisfactorily cleared up among the parties to the agreement.

It's not clear if the messages contained any specific time frame for the establishment of such a tripartite coalition, but the impression of the U.S. embassy here is that the time is short—days, not weeks.

It is felt that the Communists, in a position to take over by force if they choose, are not in a mood to dally.

The U.S. embassy here has brought strong pressure on South Vietnamese President Huong to step aside and make way for Minh. There is also pressure to this end from within the South Vietnamese government, from leading opposition figures and from France.

As long as there is obvious and significant movement toward a political solution acceptable to the Communists, it is felt the current battle lull will continue.

Should the movement falter, however, it is felt that the Communists might tighten the military noose another notch around Saigon without an actual full scale attack on the capital, thus encouraging additional speedy movement.

If the prospects for a political settlement have slightly brightened the mood here, it seems clear that the United States will have little or no role in the future of South Vietnam. In the most definitive statement to date on this subject, the Communists made it clear in their broadcast Thursday that they want the Americans out.

The PRG radio statement said that "the only correct way to solve the problems of South Vietnam" would be for the United States to end all military and intelligence activity and withdraw all military and intelligence personnel, including "military personnel in civilian guise."

As for a new administration in Saigon, it "must end for good the policy of dependence on the United States" and must demand that the United States withdraw from South Vietnam.

It would not do, the statement said, simply to have a new set of "flunkeys" installed to continue old policies.

If Minh comes to power, it is not inconceivable that he would, by prearrangement, order the Americans to leave Vietnam. It is not certain, from Thursday's statement, whether humanitarian aid from the Americans would be accepted but, according to analysts here, the door is not completely closed. The U.S. embassy might remain under considerably reduced circumstances.

The latest available figures show that there were 1,360 Americans in South Vietnam as of Thursday night. There were 8,000 several weeks ago.