

Saigon removes obstacle to talks

Examiner News Services

SAIGON — South Vietnam's National Assembly told President Tran Van Huong yesterday he could disregard the constitution and name his own successor — possibly Gen. Duong Van "Big" Minh — if that was necessary to open peace talks with the Communists.

Radio Hanoi repeated yesterday the Communists would not negotiate with members of former President Thieu's administration — including Huong, Thieu's vice president.

Senior government officials were told early today that the U.S. defense attache office in Saigon will be closed within 36 hours, ending 25 years of American military advisory efforts.

Vietnamese civilian and military police, meanwhile, swept through a camp of refugees at Tan Son Nhut airbase who were awaiting evacuation flights and arrested several military deserters, government officials and draft-age youths.

Vietnamese military police took photographs of many of those awaiting evacuation flights.

As if to spur Saigon's political decisions, the Viet Cong shelled Saigon before dawn today in the first such attack since the signing of the cease-fire agreement in January 1973.

First reports said eight persons were killed and 22 were wounded. Police said four rockets fell into the central zone, near the riverfront and the bus station. One landed near the government-owned Majestic Hotel beside the Saigon River and started a small fire.

North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces are within easy striking distance of the capital, according to intelligence reports. There is speculation that they have not launched a major drive because they expect favorable political developments.

But the Viet Cong, broadcasting from Hanoi, warned, "We are facing a crucial moment" and called on

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South Vietnamese to rise against the Saigon government.

The Assembly voted 123-0 to allow Huong to step outside the country's constitution and name a successor, but it reserved the right to approve Huong's choice. The vote was seen as a major step toward formation of a coalition with the Communists — and possibly a way to avoid an attack on the capital.

The assembly also unanimously authorized a political settlement based on the Paris peace agreement.

There was no immediate indication what Huong's offer of the premiership Friday, saying he would do. Minh turned down Huong's offer of the premiership Friday and said he wanted only the top job.

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Huong warned that if negotiations failed Saigon "will become a mountain of bones and a river of blood."

He said he became president to negotiate but not to surrender.

Huong said the quest for negotiations was not tantamount to surrender. "We're determined to have negotiations, not a negotiated surrender," he said, "because if we're going to surrender, why negotiate?"

In a biting reference to the United States, Huong said: "We have been abandoned by our friends the United States, and it is clear our friends don't want to help us any more. We now have no choice but to negotiate."

Huong, in an apparent attempt to bolster military morale, said the government was paying each front-line soldier a 10,000 piastre (\$44) bonus.

He also announced a 15-day amnesty period for soldiers and civil servants who fled the country during the Communist offensive. He said anyone who returned during the period would not be charged.

In vivid contrast to the confusion and uncertainty on the government side, the Viet Cong radiated a confidence that was easily translated into arrogance.

Meeting the foreign press at his weekly press conference yesterday, Col. Vo Dong Giang, spokesman for the Provisional Revolutionary Government, said: "If we cannot come to terms with a new government, they will invite upon themselves more and heavier defeats."

Although Minh generally is considered acceptable to the Viet Cong, Giang declined to commit himself on this point. He said: "I think it's impossible to make an accurate assessment at this time. We would have to know what his policy is and what action he plans to take."

All U.S. military personnel must withdraw, he said.