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Thailand, N. Vietnam Open Talks on Ties

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BANGKOK, May 21—North Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien headed a 13-man delegation that arrived here today to begin negotiations on the normalization of relations between the two countries.

In an airport statement, Phan said conditions were "extremely favorable" for negotiations, adding a cautionary prediction that the talks could achieve good results "if the Thai government adopts the same attitude."

The unexpected promptness of the North Vietnamese response to Thailand's invitation for a dialogue is a turn-around on Hanoi's previous demand that diplomatic relations would have to wait until the American military presence in Thailand is ended.

The delegation was greeted at Bangkok's international airport by about 300 Vietnamese residents of Thailand shouting, "Welcome, Welcome" and waving bouquets of roses.

Phan's airport speech lost no time in capitalizing on the recent American involvement in the Mayaguez affair and the shock waves it created in Thailand. "The trend for peace, independence and neutrality is strongly developing in many Southeast Asian countries," he said.

"The people there are resolutely struggling for the U.S. withdrawal from their countries and for the U.S. noninterference in their internal affairs," Phan said. The Vietnamese people fully support their Thai friends' struggle in recent days against the U.S. deliberate use of Thai territory in staging extremely serious acts of war against Cambodia, for the defense of Thai independence and sovereignty."

The delegation is scheduled to hold two days of talks with Thai Foreign Ministry officials and to have at least one meeting and a dinner with Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan before leaving Saturday.

According to Foreign Ministry officials, the Thai government first made contact last

November with the North Vietnamese through Vientiane, where both countries have embassies. The talks reportedly never got beyond preliminaries until the time of the dispute with the new South Vietnamese government over the return of the South Vietnamese aircraft from Thailand, where they were brought by fleeing South Vietnamese pilots on the eve of the surrender of the former government.

Earlier attempts to start the North Vietnamese had always foundered on the question of preliminary discussions with the American military presence in Thailand.

The other point of contention between the two traditional rivals has been the 40,000 Vietnamese refugees who fled to Thailand in the late 1940s when the French were attempting to reoccupy Vietnam.

The issue of their repatriation has always been thorny, with Thailand wishing to have them return because of suspicions that they retain strong ties to North Vietnam and that they have assisted the Thai Communist insurgency movement.

The North Vietnamese delegation's speech made pointed reference to the refugees—"the people throughout the country (Vietnam) have constantly followed your activities to defend your legitimate interests. The government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam has energetically protested and condemned all the encroachments on the lives and property of Vietnamese nationals."

The Vietnamese, most of whom live in the border areas of northeastern Thailand, have been discriminated against and denied certain citizenship and property rights by the Thai government, which has always intended that they should be repatriated.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, several thousand were repatriated through the Red Cross, but this ceased as the Vietnam war intensified. In the past few weeks, an anti-Vietnamese campaign has been

waged in Nongkhai, a Thai border town near Vientiane, the Laotian capital, with Vietnamese shopkeepers being forced to close down.

How much of this campaign is inspired by rightist elements who wish to get rid of the Vietnamese as soon as possible, and how much is simply prompted by racial tension, is difficult to assess, but their repatriation is bound to be an important negotiating issue.

No observers believe that diplomatic relations will be announced in the very near future, but with the end of the Vietnam war, Hanoi is believed to want to improve relations with Thailand. A similar attitude is apparent in certain elements of the Thai government, who believe that with the U.S. role in the region diminishing, it is imperative that Thailand accommodate itself more to the political realities.

The Thai military have always considered Vietnam a traditional enemy, and in the early 1970s, 20,000 Thai troops fought in the CIA-financed secret army in Laos against Communist Pathet Lao as well as North Vietnamese soldiers.

The chief concern of the military here is how much military assistance North Vietnam will give the Thai Communist movement, which reportedly is already supplied by North Vietnam through neighboring Laos.

According to a Foreign Ministry source, the North Vietnamese delegation initially wanted to be housed in a secluded villa but finally settled for the top floor of a medium-priced hotel near the center of town. The sources also said that the delegation was planning to bring extensive radio transmission equipment to keep in touch with Hanoi.

Observers here expect that the delegation will not deal substantively with the issue of the return of the U.S.-supplied South Vietnamese aircraft, as this has already been raised by the new South Vietnamese government when its delegation passed through here during the weekend.