

**Letter
From
Vietnam**

Arias in Russian and the

By James Fenton

Special to The Washington Post

SAIGON — "It's like a spa at the end of the season," said a dejected Englishman, sitting on the empty terrace of the Continental Palace, this abandoned, echoing, colonial hotel.

The rains have begun, leaving the air cooler, clearer and cleaner and most of the foreigners are preparing to leave. Yet, there is another season already underway.

The old National Assembly building opposite the hotel has been returned to its proper function of opera house. The black-suited orchestra arrives in the evening by bus. They play high-lights from Beethoven (Lenin's favourite composer), Johann Staruss, and "La

Donna E Mobile" from Verdi's Rigoletto was sung in Russian.

This past Friday there was a reception at the Independence Palace on the sixth anniversary of the founding of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

It was a jovial affair and the arch above the palace gates carried the emblem of the National Liberation Front in neon lighting. The gates themselves have been removed.

There were guests from every walk of life. The Buddhist monks, who are not allowed to eat in the evenings or to consume the scotch that was offered, had to wait until the ice cream was served before they came into their own. Until then, they sat on the open terraces, like wall flowers.

There were Saigon tradesmen, who were mysteriously said to have worked with the NLF. There were Communist journalists from various parts of the world and three Americans from the Saigon press corps. There were African diplomats from Peking, accredited to the PRG.

And then there were the PRG leaders themselves. One hardly noticed them at first as they moved through the crowd. President Huynh Tan Phat, with his face wreathed in smiles, was dressed in a khaki suit of the kind favored by foreign correspondents in the tropics, but with the addition of a matching khaki tie.

The PRG leaders sat down and ate rather little. The rest ate standing. Then we circulated. I ate bananas

with NLF chairman Nguyen Huu Tho.

SAIGON'S MILITARY CHIEF, Gen. Tran Van Tra, was in a very good mood, and laughed a lot when we reminded him of some of his past activities. When asked if it was true that, as the Americans say, he masterminded the Tet offensive from a headquarters in Thuduc, he said he couldn't remember.

When told that in Lucien Bedard's book "The Quick-sand War", he is featured as having organized a patriotic liquidation campaign against the French, he would not elaborate, he said however, that he had worked in the environs of Saigon since before 1945.

He said he hoped that in the future, when security was better, it would be pos-

NLF in Neon

sible for journalists to travel outside the Saigon-Giadinh area to which they are now confined. He also said that work was underway to reopen the railway.

The railway has so far been restored from Hanoi to Nhatrang, an achievement that will certainly have a profound effect on the economy of the country, that leaves only the 250-mile stretch from Nhatrang to Saigon to complete.

THE PRG MINISTERS had held a Cabinet meeting to mark the anniversary and discuss the economic problems facing their country. Already things are moving, even though the cash crisis remains.

Here are a few economic indicators:

- The price of rice has

come down slightly. Vietnamese brands of cigarettes have dropped in price while foreign makes continued to be pegged around the dollar mark. Black market gas is running steadily at \$10 a gallon. After a promising start early in the month, bicycles are beginning to show an uncertain future. Although a further firming of prices is expected if, as announced the banks reopen in the next few days and more cash becomes available.

• Light industry has shown a marked revival, with roadside bicycle assembly units spreading throughout the suburbs and new spare parts appearing, apparently from Cholon.—

James Fenton

—James Fenton