

South Vietnam Reds Pressed for Negotiated End

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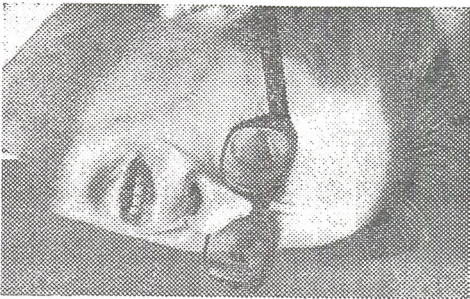
PARIS, June 11—As the North Vietnamese forces pressed ever closer to Saigon, the South Vietnamese Communists' Provisional Revolutionary Government asked France to arrange negotiations with ever more urgency, according to authoritative French sources.

Information on the politics of the approaching end of the war and some of its aftermath has now become available here.

According to the French, the Vietnamese Communists became certain that they were winning the war after the fall of Ban Me Thuot on March 10. However, still uneasy about the timetable and the cost in lives, they were expecting to be unable to move into Saigon before late summer and possibly only after a ferocious battle.

There were, the sources here are convinced, three possibilities from the Communist point of view. The first was to get President Nguyen Van Thieu replaced by a senior Saigon personality who would negotiate a coalition with the Provincial Revolutionary Government, possibly the former Defense Minister, Gen. Tran Van Don.

After the fall of Hue, that was discarded as unnecessary. Then the second possibility was considered, to insist on replacing Mr. Thieu with a personality of the "third force" who had been in contact with the Provincial Revolutionary Government, such as Gen. Duong Van Minh, and negotiating a



Camera Press
Jean-Marie Merillon was French envoy in Saigon.



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Le Duan, Hanoi Communist party head.

government with him. The third possibility was straight military victory, and the second idea was also discarded as this third possibility seemed more and more easily within Hanoi's early reach.

Fear of Being Eclipsed

The Provisional Revolutionary Government preferred negotiations for fear of being eclipsed and left powerless by the North Vietnamese if the war ended with the entry of Hanoi's troops in the southern capital and without any agreement, according to evidence here.

That is what did happen. The new information is that the Provisional Revolutionary Government now has virtually nothing to say in the South. Saigon is being run by a North Vietnamese military committee whose head, though a southerner by birth, wears the North Vietnamese Army uniform and is a part of Hanoi's team.

On only two ceremonial occasions has the known Provisional Revolutionary Government leadership appeared in Saigon since the take-over, and then it disappeared from view. The ministers who figure on the Provisional Revolutionary Government's cabinet list have not taken over the Saigon Government departments, which function with unknown or invisible North Vietnamese Communist heads.

But Le Duan, the head of the party, has been shutting between Hanoi and Saigon in a small Ilyushin jet.

According to the information, all officials with whom the French Ambassador, Jean-Marie Merillon, who has since left, dealt after the take-over were northerners who did not give their names.

It was Mr. Merillon, the senior French diplomat in Vietnam, who argued with Mr. Thieu that he should leave, the sources said. He told the South Vietnamese President that it was the only way to save a vast number of lives in Saigon and probably Mr. Thieu's own life.

Even after the unexpectedly rapid advance of North Vietnamese troops had made the fall of Saigon a foregone conclusion, Mr. Thieu insisted on fighting to the bitter end. French diplomatic reports say he argued that he could establish an enclave in Saigon and the Mekong Delta and negotiate later from a better position.

The United States Ambassador, Graham A. Martin, was so preoccupied with organizing the American evacuation in the last few days of Mr. Thieu's Government that he did not take part in such exchanges, the information indicates. The French reports said Mr. Martin delayed arranging evacuation for eight to ten days beyond Washington's wishes and then barely had time to work it out.

Generals Advise Departure

However, the French believe

that the Central Intelligence Agency mission in Saigon, which rejected Mr. Martin's persistent optimism even as the situation was crumbling, did help persuade Mr. Thieu to leave.

On the night before Mr. Thieu finally agreed to go, his generals, headed by the chief of the general staff, Cau Van Vien, told him it was the only way to save Saigon. More than one Vietnamese described Mr. Thieu to diplomats in those days as being "like Hitler in his bunker, talking about imaginary divisions."

He turned power over to his vice president, Tran Van Huong

who lasted a week and then handed over to General Minh. By that time, there was no longer any question of negotiations, which might have been possible some weeks earlier.

On the day Ambassador Martin left Saigon, by helicopter from the American Embassy compound, he went to pay a formal farewell call on Ambassador Merillon, whose embassy was around the block.

The American Ambassador presented the French Ambassador with a pagoda statue as a farewell present, and took his leave.

A little after 4 that afternoon, Ambassador Martin boarded his helicopter. But the lift continued until 8 o'clock the next morning.

Witnesses in the French compound next door could watch as the Americans rose floor by floor through their Embassy to reach the helicopter platform, and the Vietnamese throng pushed after them, kept a floor behind by the Marines.

Hanoi's Tanks Enter

Shortly after the last helicopter took off, guards shooting to keep more refugees from trying to clamber aboard or ride its skids, an American turned up with his suitcase. It was too late. He was sheltered in the French Embassy for a while, and eventually sent home.

By that time, the first North Vietnamese tanks were moving down Hai Ba Trung Street, past the side entrance of the French Embassy, on their way to the Presidential Palace. The lead tank was firing its cannon to clear the way.

Otherwise, there was no

fighting as they entered Saigon.

Gen. Minh was awaiting them in the palace. He was taken off in a jeep to the radio station. Then, according to reports, he disappeared. Actually, it is now known, he and his entourage were returned to the palace for 48 hours, the men put in one room and the women in another. Then he was sent home.

A few days later, communications with the outside world were cut.

Apart from the French Embassy, where there are still 153 people with a tenuous radio link abroad, the only Western diplomats left in Saigon are a Belgian and a Swiss, without staffs or communications.

The Polish and Hungarian delegations to the International Control Commission remained, but the report said they were confined to their quarters except when they too were admitted to the two victory ceremonies, and their telephones have been cut. A Soviet mission that had been accredited to the Provisional Revolutionary Government in Loc Ninh before the final offensive, was evacuated to Hanoi.

No Soviet or Chinese diplomats have been permitted to come to Saigon.

The conclusion of informed sources here is that Hanoi is now in no hurry to decide how to deal with Saigon politically, and that there may be a long delay in setting up a new South Vietnamese Government, if ever that is done.

The view in Paris is that Hanoi has now decided to maintain direct control, a step that the sources said was "bound to come sooner or later" but that they think came much sooner than Hanoi planned or than might have been the case.

Ambassador Martin's arguments for refusing to urge President Thieu to leave earlier when the French, at least, thought a negotiated end was still possible, were that Mr. Thieu's departure would provoke wild panic and chaotic collapse in Saigon.

So far as the French know, his instructions from Washington were vague during this period and such decisions were left to his discretion.

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