



He may have brought out a fortune in gold, but friends of Thieu, once Vietnam's president, don't think so

Thieu's gold: Just suitcases full of laundry?

United Press International

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Nguyen Van Thieu has given up his huge villa for a \$200-a-month brick house, but rumors still circulate that the former South Vietnam president escaped Saigon with a fortune in gold.

A ranking official of the Nationalist Chinese government says Thieu "most likely" brought no gold to Taiwan, "not more than a few ounces in the form of jewelry anyway."

This view has gathered support from American military and intelligence sources, former Thieu associates in Saigon and some European airline officers.

All indicated Thieu tried but failed to ship some of South Vietnam's gold reserve out of the country before the Communist takeover last April 30.

Still, there have been persistent reports that Thieu brought a considerable amount of gold when he arrived in Taipei in the wee hours of April 26 aboard a special U.S. transport plane.

Thieu himself has refused to talk to newsmen since his arrival and has issued no public statements.

The Chinese official said the huge amount of luggage brought by the Thieu party was not searched by customs officials. But subsequent information convinced him Thieu's aides told the truth when they claimed the former president had brought no gold with him.

The official, who asked not to be named, said that if there had been any gold Thieu would have had to negotiate its sale to the Taipei government, since shipping it out of the country would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The former president's current lifestyle also tends to confirm the "no-gold" theory.

Thieu has given up an \$1,800-a-month villa with a huge garden and swimming pool to move into a two-story brick house appropriate for a middle class Taiwanese.

A former official of the Nationalist Chinese embassy in Saigon said Thieu gave up the villa for "purely economical reasons."

Thieu's present three-bedroom residence, with a low wall surrounding a 20-by-10-foot front yard, is subleased from an American serviceman. It has no garage and Thieu has no car.

According to the two security agents assigned on round-the-clock guard duty, Thieu has only left the gaudy green house six or seven times, mostly for sightseeing trips. He always takes a taxi instead of the car offered him by the security agents.

Several veteran Vietnam war correspondents have traveled to Taiwan to interview Thieu, but none has even reached him on the telephone, sources close to the former president say.

Ranking government officials say Thieu has chosen to remain silent because he believes whatever he says would be ridiculed and discredited by his critics.

"Why should a man who has suffered enough from failure ask for more humiliation, particularly when it is not necessary?" one official asked.

The official said Thieu indicated to him that he may one day want to talk to newsmen and it's likely the first newsmen he chooses to talk to would be the Chinese on Taiwan.

London news reports say Thieu has been granted a six-month visa to visit the British capital, where his 12-year-old son attends a private school.