

Another Spasm in Vietnam

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—The peace negotiations in Paris have changed very little during the past eighteen months but the war in Indochina has. Nothing confirmed this fact more strikingly than last weekend's U. S. air raids on the North.

The excuse for the raids was Hanoi's destruction of an unarmed American reconnaissance plane. However there is every likelihood they were designed not only to punish anti-aircraft batteries and missiles but also to smash at truck convoys jamming the entrance to Mugia Pass through which matériel and reinforcements must pass en route to Southern battlefields.

Initial repercussions have been less violent than might have been anticipated, which mirrors the change in the actual war situation. The Communist delegations to the peace talks here have decided temporarily to boycott sessions. The Soviet reaction has been reported as mild. The young American New Left is violently angry and the middle aged American Left has resumed weary fulminations.

Nevertheless, while it is questionable whether the decision to bomb was politically wise, the climate of American opinion has clearly altered with the battlefield situation in Indochina itself. As the latter improves and U. S. casualty figures decline with withdrawal of troops, the pattern of an eventual arrangement emerges. This arrangement is ancillary to the Paris negotiations.

I have not been in Vietnam since 1969 and therefore must depend on other observers. Last week London's

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Sunday Times published an article from Saigon by its veteran diplomatic correspondent, Nicholas Carroll: He wrote:

[A] "spectacular shift in the nature of the war has been so gradual during the past eighteen months that its impact is only now starting to be realized outside South Vietnam . . . The simple fact is that the Vietcong, which for so many years has held South Vietnam in thrall by murder and terror, are on the run . . . They are being driven out of the villages and hamlets into small base areas . . .

"Nor is that the end of it. The regular forces of the North Vietnamese army can no longer maintain themselves in South Vietnam on levies of food and money raised by the Vietcong . . . They have been driven into the foothills and mountains . . . The Vietnamese war as the world has known it in recent years, with its monstrous casualty rate and its characteristics which evoked such widespread revulsion in the West, seems to be over."

Three basic facts have contributed to this. The first was the 1968 Tet offensive which achieved enormous propaganda triumphs but in which the Communists suffered immense casualties (Carroll estimates 250,000) and sacrificed the cream of their underground cadres.

The second was President Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy steadily reducing American troop levels. The third was the military strike into Cambodia, following Lon Nol's ouster of Prince Sihanouk, which destroyed

the Communists' sanctuary and, by capturing Sihanoukville, deprived them of their main supply source.

Now every man and bullet must come down the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and Mugia Pass whose entrance has just been bombed. Carroll concludes: "It is impossible to overestimate the changes this action [the Cambodian incursion] has meant to South Vietnam."

The image of "popular" Sihanouk's "neutral" Cambodia reflected in America was distorted. The current London Economist writes: There is an extraordinary feeling of national unity, a sense of purpose, that binds the army and the Phnom Penh politicians together. The army that General Lon Nol has created in six months is a people's army, the first that has fought in Asia on the non-Communist side."

I have chosen English observers as witnesses in this argument as less committed to preconceived bias than American or French hawks or doves. The probability is that the Paris peace talks will resume, the latest wave of indignation in American opinion will subside, and the fighting itself will continue slowly to peter out.

Certainly no settlement looms. For years the Indochina area may ferment in a condition of neither war nor peace with guerrilla actions, isolated terror and occasional flare ups.

What may indeed slowly and painfully develop is a kind of situation vaguely resembling that between partitioned segments of India-Pakistan except that in this instance the quarrel will be nastier and bloodier and neither side will recognize the other for years.