

Envoys in Storm's Eye-- A Strange Mood in Hanoi

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Hanoi

The mood in Hanoi's small diplomatic community this week is a strange one: It is a little like being in the quiet of a storm center.

There is general belief that the long war is approaching a climax. There are new battles in the South. President Nixon is in Moscow and people talk of the possibility of new peace moves. But in Hanoi the diplomats just wait. They listen to the radio to find out what's happening in Hue or Moscow.

The immediate subject of concern is whether the United States will drastically intensify the bombing, including major attacks on Hanoi. Rumors of that possibility vie with reports of a possible understanding between Mr. Nixon and the Russians that the United States will not escalate the bombing further during the summit.

CONCERN

Since the Moscow talks started Monday, Hanoi has had only one brief alert each day with no bombs heard. An official announcement, however, said the bombing continued elsewhere.

Yesterday, the most expe-

rienced Western observer in Hanoi, a non-Communist diplomat, expressed concern when he heard of a White House official's account of asserted troubles in North Vietnam. He was concerned, he said, "if responsible decisions are taken on the basis of such nonsensical reports."

Major General Alexander M. Haig Jr. said Monday in Washington that morale and the political structure here were strained, with food shortages appearing and prostitution growing. In a White House background briefing, he told some correspondents that the North Vietnamese leadership was split on the war.

The reference to prostitution was especially puzzling to the senior Western diplomat and other observers here. To foreigners North Vietnamese society seems notably puritanical.

Food shortages could ap-

pear if the American effort to cut off supplies is effective over a long haul. North Vietnam imports wheat and some rice among staples.

HARDSHIP

But it is impossible, at least for outsiders, to detect any hardship now. Cheap cafes and restaurants are still functioning in Hanoi.

I have traveled to country villages in the last two days. Of course it is difficult to make an appraisal on such visits, but there was not the slightest sign of a food shortage or a strain in morale.

As for the political structure or leadership of the Communist Party, neither the foreigner here nor, evidently, the mass of the people know much if anything about their thinking until it is made public. But it would be a drastic change if the structure fell apart now after holding up under years of war.