

Freed Vietnam Neutralist Returns to Political Wars

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SAIGON, Sept. 24 — If the South Vietnamese authorities thought that Ngo Ba Thanh would retreat into discreet, uncritical silence when they released her after two years in prison, they were very much mistaken.

Though still weak from the effects of her imprisonment and a five-month hunger strike, she has plunged back into the pacifist, conciliatory political organizing that got her into trouble in the first place.

The Saigon government and the Vietcong, she said in an interview today, her third day at home, are "caught in vicious circle of violence. They can't escape from the errors of their former policies. Those policies have failed. They signed an agreement in Paris that admitted no military solution was possible. That is our opportunity. All we lacked was a leader, and I'm saying to everybody, here I am, let's go."

The "we" to whom she was referring is the so-called third force in Vietnamese politics, the neutralist, nationalist element that supports neither President Thieu's government nor the Vietcong and advocates disarmament and reconciliation.

Its membership is unknown and in terms of organization on paper it does not exist at all. Those who believe in it claim it represents the Vietnamese silent majority, and those who do not dismiss it as insignificant or opportunistic.

Either way, it lacks recognized leaders, and that is

the situation that Thanh said she intends to rectify.

"This is my chance. We must impose ourselves on the two sides, not wait to be invited. You don't ask permission to be important in a country."

She Stands Out

In South Vietnam's humorless political world of French-trained pharmacists, lawyers and generals, Thanh stands out like a plaid jacket at a formal ball. In pigtails and baggy sweater, she looks more like a teenager than a political organizer, and her direct methods, — slogans and sitdowns, banners and broadsides — are highly unusual here.

She may be only a lonely visionary or "a leader in search of an organization," as an American skeptic puts it, but her imprisonment has made her a celebrity. She is receiving respectful attention in front page newspaper stories here and has an enthusiastic following in the United States — which was reflected by an offer of a teaching position from Columbia University, which she is still considering.

At 42, Thanh is one of Vietnam's best-known and best-educated women. Trained in international law, she holds advanced degrees from Columbia and the universities of Paris and Barcelona, has lectured on law at Saigon University for several years, and has written on legal questions in four languages.

She says she has been a pacifist for 13 years "any political methods are justified except for violence." She is an outspoken critic of the Thieu government, but never has been seriously ac-

cused of supporting the Communists.

Thanh was arrested in September, 1971, after participating in a demonstration outside the National Assembly against Thieu's uncontested presidential election campaign.

Never Brought to Trial

She was charged with breach of the peace, illegal association and distribution of leaflets "detrimental to the people's anti-Communist struggle," but never tried. The government, in announcing her release last week, said that she is free only until she can go to trial, but Thanh said she does not expect that to happen.

Vietnamese and American sources say she and three recently convicted labor union leaders were released at this time because of Thieu's concern that publicity over political prisoners here was jeopardizing his chances of getting the American aid money he needs from the U.S. Congress.

Thanh said she "took it for granted" that her release was the result of direct American intervention, though there is no evidence available here that any officials of the Nixon administration specifically requested her release as a condition of continuing aid to the government.

Thanh lives with her husband and children, including a daughter who served as her liaison with the press while she was in prison, in a modest house in downtown Saigon.

It was a somber place while she was gone but it is bustling now, and the dark, book-lined living room is lit-



Associated Press

Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh poses with her husband and posters she made during her stay in prison. The one she is holding reads "Peace Through Comparative Law."

tered with relics of the campaign she carried on even while she was in jail.

Knitted Sweaters

There are the bulky sweaters she knitted, bearing the words "peace" and "freedom."

There is a white robe that bears paper labels with the names of other political prisoners. There are copies of the documents she prepared to support her legal argument that the third force must be accepted as a legitimate participant in Vietnamese political life.

"The four parties (to the Paris agreement) had to sur-

render their former objectives," she said. "When I called for peace and reconciliation, they said I was crazy, that it a an illusion. Now hey have accepted it, and I challenge them to respect their own signatures."

Thanh looks thin and pale, and said she cannot eat much because she has not recovered from her hunger strike, during which she lost over 40 pounds. But she refused to discuss allegations of brutality in the country's prisons.

"We have to forget about the past," she said. "We have to forget it or we will never get away from it."