

In Saigon, Doubts About Peace

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 26—The Vietnamese Communists' negative reaction to the latest allied peace proposals, which was expected, tells much not only about why peace has been impossible to attain here but also about why the American and South Vietnamese Governments may have decided to make the secret negotiations of the past 30 months public now. During the past two months, North Vietnamese forces have scored signal victories in conventional battles against out-classed Cambodian and Laotian troops on Route 6 northeast of Pnompenh and on the Plaine des Jarres and the Boloven Plateau in Laos. At the same time, American and South Vietnamese officials here have been saying that they expect a large Communist offensive in South Vietnam by the middle of February, that is, over Tet, the Lunar New Year holiday, and just before President Nixon makes his trip to Peking on Feb. 21.

"We shall continue to fight until total victory, smashing the wicked Nixon Doctrine, and his bankrupt Vietnamization program," the Hanoi radio said today.

More Troops Withdrawn

If a big attack comes, the Americans and the South Vietnamese want to be able to say they did everything they could to negotiate a peace settlement. And if it does not come, they want to be able to claim success either for their diplomacy or for the Vietnamization program. The disclosure of peace proposals that Mr. Nixon said had already been rejected or ignored appears to cover both of these eventualities.

"If the enemy rejects our offer to negotiate, we shall continue our program of ending American involvement in the war by withdrawing our remaining forces as the South Vietnamese develop the capability of defending themselves," Mr. Nixon said in his address last night.

And today the military command announced the withdrawal of two more elements of the last remaining American combat unit immediately south of the demilitarized zone, the 101st Airborne Division. Only one battalion of 700 men remains of the division and it, too, will go in the next few days.

Air Challenge Increases

At the rate of withdrawal announced by Mr. Nixon two weeks ago, only 69,000 Americans will be left in Vietnam by May 1. Only two ground combat units of any importance remain even now—the 196th Infantry Brigade, near Danang, and the Third Brigade of the First Cavalry Division (Air-mobile), in the jungles to the north of Saigon.

President Nixon also said last night, "If the enemy's answer to our peace offer is to step up their military attacks, I shall fully meet my responsibility as Commander in Chief of our Armed Forces to protect our remaining troops."

In Saigon that is taken to mean that the bombing will continue. It has, in fact, been growing more intense this month.

The North Vietnamese have also been increasing their challenge in the air. Since the dry season began late in November, they have deployed some of their MIG-21 fighters across their western borders over Laos,

Big New Offensive by Foe Expected in February

where much of the American bombing is concentrated, and have fired surface-to-air missiles at the United States planes with growing frequency.

Last Wednesday, while conducting reconnaissance over the Quanlang airfield in North Vietnam, a Navy jet was fired at by SAM'S and a few minutes later a Navy F-4 shot down a MIG-21 with air-to-air missiles, according to the United States command. The reconnaissance missions are of the type that provide intelligence for air strikes.

Late last month, after increased challenges by North Vietnamese warplanes over Laos, the command launched five days of large-scale bombing at Quanlang and other airfields and at anti-aircraft gun and missile sites.

Because of bad weather, the bombing is thought to have had little effect. Now, with air activity still at a high point, arguments are being advanced by the military here for another attempt at discouraging the North Vietnamese planes. According to officers here, President Nixon's announcement that the secret peace talks had been fruitless could only add strength to the argument for more large-scale bombing raids.

South Vietnamese Skeptical

Thus those in Saigon who heard the disclosures by President Nixon and President Nguyen Van Thieu on the radio did not greet them with any sense that a settlement of the war was near.

The daily newspaper that is controlled by Hoang Duc Nha, President Thieu's press secretary, said in an editorial just before the announcements were made: "The United States must not believe that concessions from this side would achieve a favorable response from the Communists. Rather, the more we compromise, the more they demand."

"Therefore we think the best way to get back the captured American pilots would be to negotiate over the heads of the North Vietnamese, or to resume the bombing of North Vietnam. The Communists will not negotiate seriously as long as their power to make war is still not destroyed."

Indeed that is what the broadcast by the Hanoi radio, repeated in Vietnamese several times today, seemed to say.

North Vietnam has insisted on the withdrawal of all American and foreign allied troops from Vietnam without "any condition whatsoever." But the Hanoi radio today said "the new American proposal for a pullout" still contains a precondition, that the United States still wants to maintain its colonialist machinery in Vietnam through their puppet clique," its label for the Thieu Government.

Fairness of Poll Questioned

The proposal provides that the present administrative machinery of the Saigon Government will remain in charge if a peace agreement is signed, but that President Thieu and Vice President Tran Van Huong will resign a month before new elections. These elections would be held in the six-month period between the date of the agreement and the final withdrawal of allied forces from Vietnam.

Even non-Communist opposition figures here have been skeptical about the fairness of any election that is organized by the Government ma-

chinery. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and Gen. Duong Van Minh refused to run in the presidential election Oct. 3 because they said the vote would be rigged.

One minor Government official said of the Communists today: "Don't think they will accept his proposal unless he removes every province and district chief. As long as Thieu's chiefs are in place he is sure to win any election. They control everything for him."

The new proposals also give as a condition of a cease-fire that there will be no further infiltration of outside forces into any of the countries of Indochina.

The North Vietnamese are now estimated to have 50,000 to 90,000 combat and support troops in northern Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They have 55,000 to 60,000 more in Cambodia, according to Allied intelligence.

Enemy Tanks Spotted

Some of these troops are concentrated in well-established base areas in the mountains and jungles where the borders of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos meet, west of Dakto and Benhet in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, and much of the officially expressed apprehension about a Tet offensive concerns enemy intentions in the area.

President Thieu's office started much speculation on Dec. 20 by announcing that the South Vietnamese would observe a 24-hour truce over Tet and accused the Communists of wanting to "increase their infiltration in men and weapons from the North."

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"At the present time, we have recorded large infiltrations in the highlands of Military Region II," the announcement said

The South Vietnamese have reinforced their troops in the highlands and allied intelligence says a new North Vietnamese division is on its way south from the demilitarized zone, which straddles the border between the two Vietnams. The Saigon military command said, that South Vietnamese Air Force planes had spotted four North Vietnamese tanks operating west and southwest of the border of the border outpost of Benhet yesterday. The enemy used tanks there in 1969 when Benhet was overrun and officers at the outpost say they fear it may be the first target of a new enemy drive this year.

Recent interviews with officers in the field, however, indicate that they feel that while an enemy offensive in the highlands is possible—even normal in the winter dry season—they do not all share the fears expressed in Saigon that it will be of historically large proportions.

Some press reports of "saturation bombing" of the enemy base areas along the border by B-52's from Thailand have added to the speculation about an enemy Tet offensive, but knowledgeable military officers said today, "There just haven't been that many."

Troops Are Pulled Back

But among Vietnamese here apprehension has not been so evident since the last major countrywide enemy offensive, at Tet of 1968. In the first 10 days of this month, the Saigon command pulled back about 10,000 of its troops from eastern Cambodia to reinforce Saigon's defenses.

One of the main sources of their apprehension is their uneasiness about the possibility that President Nixon and the Chinese leaders will try to arrange a peace settlement behind their backs when the President goes to Peking next month.

Recent statements by North Vietnamese officials at their embassy in Vientiane, Laos, also led at least one visitor to conclude that they share some of the fears of their opponents in the South about Mr. Nixon's trip.

The result of all this complex military and political maneuvering is that peace is probably still as far away now as it was before the President made his latest announcement.