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U.S. Stand on Resignation Upsets Thieu

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 7—President Nguyen Van Thieu, who agreed to the American peace proposal that includes an offer of his resignation in the expectation that the Communists would never accept it on his terms, is apparently worried that the United States may be taking the offer more seriously.

The issue of his immediate resignation has become central to the North Vietnamese conditions for agreeing to a cease-fire and the release of prisoners of war. In interviews over the weekend, North Vietnam's chief negotiator in Paris, Xuan Thuy, strongly emphasized this.

The nervousness in the Presidential Palace here started when Secretary of State William P. Rogers said at a news conference in Washington Thursday that the United States would be "flexible" on the resignation question.

Pro-Government newspapers, some of them financed by the Government, and the national radio, in a quasi-official commentary, began harsh criticisms of the reports of what Mr. Rogers had said, and on Friday the South Vietnamese Foreign Ministry cabled its Ambassador in Washington for confirmation.

On Saturday a minor Foreign Ministry official, Pham Dang Sum, called the reports "tantamount to interference in the Republic of Vietnam's internal affairs." But no official protest was lodged with the American Embassy.

According to an embassy spokesman Ambassador Ellsworth

worth Bunker left last Tuesday for consultations in Washington and his deputy, Samuel Berger, has not met with President Thieu since the Secretary of State made his remarks.

Tin Sang, a newspaper financed by one of Mr. Thieu's closest advisers, the presidential press secretary, Hoang Duc Nha, continued the attacks on Mr. Rogers today. "While there is such progress in the military, political and economic situation in the Republic of Vietnam an editorial said, "our American friends are making compromises and talking about flexibility to the enemy. Thanks to American flexibility, they can still turn a defeat into a victory by political maneuvering."

Mr. Nha has been out of touch with the foreign press since the peace proposals were announced by President Nixon last month. While Mr. Bunker is away, the Government has evidently chosen to make its attacks by innuendo and through its own press rather than through official channels.

In the proposals that President Nixon and President Thieu made public the allies offer the resignation of the South Vietnamese President and Vice President five months after the signing of an agreement to settle the war and a month before an internationally supervised presidential election in which the Communists could participate.

The chairman of the South Vietnamese Senate, Nguyen Van Hugen, would preside over a caretaker government, according to the proposals, which Mr. Thieu agreed to before his re-election Oct. 3 in a one-man contest.

Secretary Rogers was asked at his news conference: "Are we flexible on the composition of the caretaker government and on the length of time that President Thieu would resign prior to the election?"

He answered: "Yes, we are. And I think those are considerations that if the other side was interested in negotiating in good faith, they could raise. I think they are perfectly logical, sensible considerations that we would have to think about. We are flexible on those."

At a briefing the next day the State Department spokesman, Charles W. Bray 3d, was asked to elaborate and replied: "I won't take it here today any farther than it was taken, and I don't think that was very far, yesterday, by the Secretary."

The opposition here has so far been unable to make much of an issue out of the controversy because it finds itself, at least temporarily, taking the same position as Mr. Thieu has apparently taken—rejection of the idea of a settlement imposed over the heads of the South Vietnamese Government and people.

Nevertheless, President Thieu apparently feels he has suffered a loss of face, not because of the revelation of his offer to resign, which he disclosed himself in a confident-sounding speech on national radio on Jan. 26, but because of Mr. Roger's offer of flexibility on a proposal that Mr. Thieu considered the most generous he was prepared to make.

"Now he has lost all claim of prestige," said a prominent opposition figure Pro. Ton That Thien, an adviser to Gen. Duon Van Minh.

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* This file 4 Feb 72; does not include reference to this.