

Diplomatic Corps in Hanoi: In Quiet of a Storm Center

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HANOI, North Vietnam, May 24—The mood in Hanoi's small diplomatic community this week is strange: 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 is 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 President Nixon and the Russians that the United States will not escalate the bombing further during the summit meeting.

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

Evacuation Continuing

Preparations are apparently continuing against the possibility of even heavier bombing. Evacuation of civilians from Hanoi goes on and some East European technicians have been advised to leave.

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

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

No Hardships Detected

But it is impossible, at least for outsiders, to detect any hardship now. Cheap cafes and restaurants are still functioning in Hanoi. At a better French-style restaurant last night, paté sandwiches on French rolls were being sold from a small table at the door.

Much of Hanoi's population has been evacuated, so the situation here may not prove much. But peasants with baskets of vegetables still sell their wares on the streets.

This correspondent has 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.

In Hanoi people commonly speak of traveling 50 miles by bicycle to visit evacuated children or families. Again an outsider's intuition is limited, but there is no apparent sense of complaint about such hardships.

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.