

Slight chance of peace is seen by diplomats

LONDON — In the opinion of well-informed diplomats in the Far East, the premier of North Vietnam, Pham Fan Dong, was out of his country for at least four days during the Moscow summit meeting: May 23 through 26. The general guess is that he was in China, but it is only a guess.

The Chinese premier, Chou En-lai, was also missed during that period. He did not appear at a Syrian dinner in Peking May 24, and on May 27 he missed the Afghan National Day celebration — which he has attended the last several years. He could well have been minding domestic business, such as a politburo meeting. Or he could have been talking with Pham Van Dong.

If there was such a meeting, the supposition is that the two men discussed Hanoi's supply problem after the American mining of her ports. The North Vietnamese are telling people, in Vietnam and outside, that ships are getting through — perhaps hinting that small Vietnamese boats are running the blockade. But diplomats continue to believe the blockade is effective.

A Dong-Chou meeting might not have been concerned with supply questions alone. Expert opinion is that the bottleneck for supplies is inside Vietnam now, in the bombed roads and rail lines, and is primarily for the Vietnamese to deal with. So larger strategic and diplomatic questions could have been on the agenda.

Surprising opinion

And here one must note a surprising opinion heard in the far east after a visit to Hanoi: that there is a faint but distinguishable hope right now of bringing this interminable war to a negotiated end.

That flicker of optimism is surprising because the surface signs are for more war. The fighting continues in the south, the bombing in the north. President Nixon's effort in Moscow to bring Soviet pressure on Hanoi evidently failed.

But there are straws pointing the other way.

Chinese officials have been telling interested persons that Hanoi will accept a genuinely non-Communist government in South Vietnam for an indefinite period. They add that reunification of Vietnam would be a difficult problem taking a long time to solve, probably 10 years.

A non-Communist regime

What Leonid Brezhnev said to Nixon about Vietnam is not known. But it can be stated that, during the summit, the Russians told others exactly what the Chinese have said: that there can be a non-Communist

regime in Saigon.

Most important, Hanoi has been saying the same thing. In nonpublic channels au-

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thoritative North Vietnamese have recently emphasized that they really mean it when they say they are not asking for a Communist government in Saigon.

Given the American view that the Communists' proposal for a coalition government is only a cover for them to take power in Saigon, Washington will be highly suspicious of such assurances from Hanoi. There is a concrete way to explore them, however. That is to resume the Paris talks and in private sessions go over the actual names of people who could make up a new coalition government.

Policy change required

The difficulty is that such a course would require a change in stated American policy. It would require acceptance of what virtually every knowledgeable person regards as North Vietnam's rock-bottom demands: that President Thieu leave and that a new Saigon regime be formed.

In a sense the way has been cleared for American acceptance of that reality. For President Nixon has won, if not diplomatic help from Peking and Moscow, then at least a certain detachment in their support for Hanoi. It should be possible for the President to recognize that they have gone as far as they can with a tenaciously independent ally and that he has to move now.

Cease-fire a key

Where the two sides would have to move toward each other in Paris is on the timing of a cease-fire. The United States has always wanted a cease-fire first, then an opportunity for political change in Saigon. The Communists have wanted political agreement first, arguing that a cease-fire without it would amount to laying down their arms and accepting the legitimacy of the Thieu administration. If Washington really accepts the need for a new government in Saigon, that gap should be bridgeable.

A man who has thought as deeply as anyone about the Vietnam problem, over many years, sees the hopeful possibility of a diplomatic "convergence" now. He adds: "A non-Communist government without Thieu, a truly independent government, is the absolute maximum that Nixon and Kissinger can hope for. But do they know it?"