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U.S. Tells Nixon's Peace Talk Offer

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Washington

President Nixon on April 1 sent North Vietnam an offer to resume the talks in Paris, American officials said yesterday. The offer, made two days after the current Communist military offensive was launched, was an attempt to halt the intensified warfare.

Ambassador William J. Porter said as he disclosed the proposal in Paris that "the only response came in the form of a mushrooming invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese troops."

Other United States officials acknowledged, however, that there was little, if any, expectation in Washington that North Vietnam and the Viet Cong would call off their offensive in return for resuming the Paris talks that the U.S. suspended March 23.

STRUGGLE

Each side is now heavily engaged in a struggle for public opinion over the collapse of those talks, and are fixing responsibility for the Communist offensive that began seven days later.

Seventeen senators and 45 representatives, all Democrats except for four House

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members, told President Nixon in a letter yesterday they are "deeply concerned over what appears to be a major re-escalation of United States involvement in the war in Indochina."

Senators Edmund S. Muskie (Dem-Me.) and Hubert H. Humphrey (Dem-Minn.), both candidates for their party's presidential nomination, were among signers of the letter which was sponsored by a group called Members of Congress for Peace Through Law. Other signers included Senator Alan Cranston (Dem-Calif.), Senator John Tunney (Dem-Calif.) and Representative Paul McCloskey Jr. (Rep-Calif.), who has dropped out of the Republican race as a challenger to Mr. Nixon.

The letter said news reports indicate that "our country is now assembling in Southeast Asia one of the largest air armadas in military history . . ." It asked the President to inform Congress and the public "of the size, purpose and anticipated costs" of military actions now contemplated in Indochina.

President Nixon indicated his own desire for independent assessment of the prospects in the war by sending a mission to South Vietnam headed by Major General Alexander M. Haig, his deputy national security adviser.

White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler said Haig will be in the war zone about a week for "a special assessment of the situation there." He will be accompanied by members of the Na-

tional Security Council staff and officials of the State and Defense Departments.

The disclosure in Paris of President Nixon's April 1 message to North Vietnam, and its amplification in Washington, represented an effort to counter charges that the U.S. has turned all its attention from the conference table to the battlefield.

On March 24, Mr. Nixon said he ordered suspension of the 3½ years of stalemated Paris talks "to break the filibuster" and to prevent the Communist side from using them for "bullying the United States in a propaganda forum rather than in seriously negotiating peace . . ."

Many administration officials at that time counted the decision as an adroit move to deprive the Communists of a propaganda forum during the U.S. Presidential election campaign. When the Communist offensive began a week later, however, the U.S. was exposed to charges that it had quit the peace table at a point of intensifying warfare.

Ambassador Porter, head of the U.S. peace conference delegation, returned to Friday from consultations in Washington. He disclosed in an Orly airport news conference the April 1 message of President Nixon which he said was delivered the next day. Porter said he was doing so "to clear away the rubbish which has accumulated around the Paris peace talks."

"I can reveal to you for the first time," Porter said, "that after a thorough review of the situation, President Nixon personally di-

rected that a message be sent through a private channel to the other side stating our willingness to resume the Paris talks on April 13."

Before and since March 23 when the automatic, weekly talks were suspended, Porter said, the U.S. has been "ready and willing" to talk if "there is a real desire to negotiate." But, he said, "the thought of meetings at gunpoint which would also waste time is even less acceptable."

In Paris, spokesmen for the Viet Cong delegation said "we know of no such message" as Porter mentioned. U.S. officials said the message went to North Vietnam.

Nixon administration officials refused, however, to make public the text of the message, and provided only a characterization of it.

State Department spokesman Robert J. McCloskey said the message was "to reaffirm to the North Vietnamese that the United States wanted to return to the negotiations and that the proper atmosphere for that would not be in the face of an increased level of military activity."

Reporters asked McCloskey how he reconciled that message with the repeated public insistence since the Communist offensive began that the U.S. would not negotiate "under military pressure."

Newsmen noted that the offensive began on March 30, South Vietnamese time, was under way two days before President Nixon's secret April 1 message. By then, South Vietnamese forces had already been driven back.