

U.S. Asserts Hanoi Distorts '68 Accord

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WASHINGTON, April 21 —

The United States charged today that Hanoi was trying to rewrite history in denying that there was an understanding that it would show military restraint in return for an end to American bombing of North Vietnam in 1968.

The State Department declared emphatically that such an understanding did exist. The document on the secret 1968 talks released by Hanoi in Paris yesterday, it said, was heavily edited and "designed obviously to support arguments made from time to time by North Vietnam."

But despite pressure from newsmen, the department refused to make public a documented American version of

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the diplomatic exchange that preceded the announcement by President Lyndon Johnson on Oct. 31, 1968, making known the terms of the reported "understanding."

Robert J. McCloskey, the department spokesman, reiterated the American contention that in return for the bombing halt, North Vietnam agreed tacitly not to abuse the demilitarized zone straddling the border between the two Vietnams, not to shell populated areas in South Vietnam and not to interfere with American reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam. The United States has accused Hanoi of violating this understanding by opening its current offensive across the demilitarized zone.

Hanoi yesterday repeated that it never made such an understanding; that all it ever agreed to was the start of four-power talks with Saigon and Vietcong participation in return for the bombing halt.

Mr. McCloskey called Hanoi's version of the talks a distortion of the true record and "an attempt to rewrite the record for its advantage now."

Many administration officials have urged President Nixon in the last 24 hours to make the American record public, a high State Department official said, but so far he has resisted. Mr. McCloskey indicated the reason was "important diplomatic considerations."

These "considerations," a senior Administration official said, consisted mostly of a desire not to embarrass the Soviet Union, which played a significant go-between role in satisfying Mr. Johnson in 1968 that Hanoi understood the terms of the "understanding." At present the United States is using a variety of diplomatic channels — possibly including Moscow—to stress the need for Hanoi to show restraint in its offensive against South Vietnam.

U. S. Position Backed

Backing for the Administration came today from Cyrus R. Vance, the deputy American negotiator during the 1968 Paris talks.

Mr. Vance, now a lawyer in New York, said in a telephone interview that he had read the North Vietnamese statement in this morning's newspapers and that Hanoi's contention that there was no understanding was "just silly."

"There was an understanding," he said.

During the talks, Mr. Vance was deputy to W. Averell Harriman, the veteran American diplomat, who is now retired and who so far has declined comment.

Mr. Vance said the Hanoi document was "a selective summary which is only a partial version and leaves out very substantial parts of the discussions between us."

Much of the American record of the understanding has already been made public by Mr. Johnson in his memoirs, "The Vantage Point," published late last year. A State Department official said today that he would not dispute Mr. Johnson's version of what happened.

Johnson's Version

Mr. Johnson wrote that before he ordered the halt in American bombing, "I wanted to be absolutely certain that Hanoi understood our position."

"I asked Secretary Rusk to find out how often and in what detail we had spelled out our view of the restraints Hanoi should display if we ended all bombing of the North," he continued. "Rusk relayed my questions to Paris. The next day, Oct. 28, Harriman and Vance cabled their reply. By that time, the North Vietnamese had accepted participation of the South Vietnamese Government in future talks."

"The other two requirements, restraint in the demilitarized zone and foregoing attacks on major cities, had been spelled out in 12 separate sessions with Hanoi's representatives. Our negotiators reported that the North Vietnamese would have no flat guarantees; that was in keeping with their stand that the bombing had to be ended without conditions. But they told us that if we stopped the bombing, they would know what to do. Harriman and Vance were confident Hanoi knew precisely what we meant and would avoid the actions that we had warned them would imperil a bombing halt."

Moscow's Help Sought

"They concluded their report by saying: 'As we have previously stated on several occasions, the bombing should be resumed if our demands with respect to either the DMZ or the cities are violated,'" Mr. Johnson said.

Mr. Johnson wrote that to be "doubly sure" there was no misunderstanding, "I decided to restate our position to the Soviet Union."

He said that on Oct. 27, 1968, the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly F. Dobrynin, was given "a detailed written explanation of

our position." Mr. Dobrynin was asked to tell Moscow to restate this understanding to Hanoi "so as to avoid any charge of deception and any risk of misunderstanding."

"The following day we received Moscow's answer," Mr. Johnson wrote. "The Soviets welcomed the progress that the Paris talks seemed to be achieving. They said they were convinced the North Vietnamese were 'doing everything possible' to put an end to the war in Vietnam and to reach a peaceful settlement." Moscow expressed the opinion that any doubts regarding Hanoi's position were "groundless."

"The exchange gave me additional confidence that Hanoi could not possibly misunderstand our policy or our actions. We would stop all bombing, but the North Vietnamese would have to show restraint as well."

Mr. Vance said that the North Vietnamese account included a statement by Mr. Harriman on Oct. 30 that the bombing halt was "being taken on the basis of all the conversations we have had, taking into account what you have said, and what we have said."

The North Vietnamese document does not amplify, but Mr. Vance said that Mr. Harriman was again noting the terms of the understanding.

In a separate development, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said today that it never received a copy of the minutes of the 1968 talks.

In testimony before the committee on Tuesday, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said the committee had received such a document. But the committee staff could not find it.

The staff attributed the mix-up to a misunderstanding, and indicated that the committee might ask the State Department for a full documented record.