

U.S. Aides in Vietnam See an Unending War

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 31—Two weeks after Henry A. Kissinger's surprise visit to Saigon, high-ranking American officials here are talking privately not of a breakthrough in the peace talks, but, rather, of the possibility of unending war.

The main issue now in Paris, it is clear from recent interviews there, is the Communist demand that the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu be eliminated as part of a peace settlement. The American and South Vietnamese insist that this would be next to surrender.

A senior American official here, who consented to an interview not attributable to him by name, said that the allies have conceded as much as they can on the political issue. Last Jan. 25, President Thieu offered to resign five months after an agreement and one month before new presidential elections, but the Communists have rejected the proposal because the present Saigon administration would remain in power in the interim.

Hope for Concession

Since there is little evidence that the Communist side is softening its position, many Saigon officials feel the only chance of a breakthrough on the political issue lies in still another concession by the Americans and South Vietnamese.

There was widespread speculation when Mr. Kissinger, President Nixon's adviser for national security, arrived here on Aug. 16 that he might be here to talk President Thieu into such a concession. Mr. Kissinger talked with Mr. Thieu for two hours on Aug. 17 and for four hours on the 18th, and the South Vietnamese leader has never seemed more confident of continued American backing of his policy of "four nos"—one of which is no imposition of a coalition government with the Communists in the south.

According to one American who should know because he sees Mr. Thieu frequently, Mr. Thieu is confident that Senator George McGovern poses no real threat to President Nixon's re-election and Mr. Thieu is not even making contingency plans in case the Democratic nominee wins and implements an immediate bombing halt and troop withdrawal.

Nixon and the Election

Some officials at the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington have professed some uneasiness about what Mr. Nixon might do as Election Day approaches to defuse the war as a political issue. But conversations with other Vietnamese in Paris and here in Saigon left this correspondent with the impression that the Nixon Administration was trying its best to allay these vague fears, as it did before the Nixon trips to Moscow and Peking.

In interviews in Washington, some American officials speculated that it might not be necessary to continue the current sustained bombing of North Vietnam, or the mining of its ports, much beyond October. They expect the North Viet-

namese offensive to have run out of most of its steam by then.

But President Nixon said last Tuesday that he would not reduce or stop the bombing during the election campaign unless the prospects for a negotiated settlement improved. Any easing of military pressure on the North would cause a crisis of confidence in the Saigon Government unless it were fully explained in advance, and in the last week there has been a series of intense bombing raids around Hanoi and Haiphong.

Thieu's Faith in Bombing

Indeed, in a speech on Aug. 3, Mr. Thieu said that he thought it necessary to "keep up, relentless bombing" of North Vietnam for another six or seven months, but—directing his remarks at Washington—"if our allies are determined, peace will be restored in Indochina. If they lack determination, the Communists will revert to their half-guerrilla, half-conventional warfare, and the war will go on in Indochina forever."

Air Force officers here feel that such a statement implies stronger faith in the effectiveness of bombing than even they have.

One of Mr. Thieu's close Vietnamese advisers in the Presidential Palace said, last week, "as far as I know, Mr. Thieu and Mr. Kissinger reviewed all aspects of the Vietnam problem—but mainly they worked out a coordination of actions by both governments in this sensitive electoral period in the United States."

The adviser also said that the allies still expect the North Vietnamese to launch a series of powerful military offensives before the end of this year, and "in this context, any talk about such things as a cease-fire or a compromise is futile, if not deceiving."

Aide Visited Delta

One of Mr. Kissinger's aides, David A. Engel, took a trip down to the northern Mekong delta, where North Vietnamese forces had been infiltrating Dinh-tuong Province, to get an assessment of the situation there, according to Embassy officials. But Mr. Kissinger stayed in Saigon the whole time he was here, and most of his consultations were with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and General Frederick C. Weyand, the officials say.

What they told him is unknown. But what high Administration officials in Saigon and Washington have been telling newsmen, in background sessions, is that, as one American intelligence specialist said the other day, "I can't imagine why the other side would feel ready to give up at this point. Our faithful sources say the word is to continue, and even under the bombing they can get enough supplies to keep going for a long, long time, even at the current relatively high level of battlefield activity."

The intelligence specialist pointed out, for example, that it would take only 20 daily truckfuls of heavy 130-mm. artillery shells to enable the

North Vietnamese to keep up their heavy shelling of Quang-tri city, just below the demilitarized zone. "They drive by night and hide by day, and getting that many trucks past the bombing is no problem," the officer said. "You can't completely interdict the flow."

Disagree With Rogers

All military sources here are unanimous in predicting that even if the level of conflict subsides after the fall, the conflict can be carried on by the kind of widespread guerrilla activity that has already begun in recent weeks, with commando attacks on large military installations and with reported attempts to cut some of the principal roads to Saigon.

The sources disagree totally with Secretary of State William P. Rogers's recent prediction of a negotiated settlement of the war before or soon after the November elections. Last week the State Department, too, diluted Mr. Rogers's prediction, saying that it should, rather than a prediction, be called an expression of hope.

"I can't see any hope," an intelligence expert said. "I don't even have any illusions that the South Vietnamese can expel the North Vietnamese soon from the territory they took in April."