

# 'Peace Seems Just Around the Corner'

By Keyes Beech

SAIGON — (CDN) — Peace, Vietnam-style, seems to be just around the corner.

While official confirmation is lacking, Hanoi and Washington have reached agreement on a blueprint for peace including a cease-fire and release of American prisoners.

Whether the United States can sell its peace package to South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu is another matter. If Thieu refuses to go along, it seems certain the U.S. and North Vietnam will declare a two-way cease-fire, something that is beyond Thieu's power to control.

## POW Report

There were tantalizing reports from Hanoi that downed American pilots were being shifted from prison camps to a central assembly point in preparation for their release.

A rapid de-escalation of the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam reinforced the belief that peace of a sort is not far away.

Whether a cease-fire will come before or after the Nov. 7 U.S. presidential election is in doubt. At the moment it could go either way.

Hanoi is pressing hard to get President Nixon's signature on the dotted line before the election, just in case his heart gets harder if he wins four more years.

In its zeal to get a pre-election agreement, Hanoi last week called in key members of the diplomatic corps to ask them to urge their governments to use their influence with Nixon.

## Agreement?

But according to leaks from South Vietnamese sources, Nixon is reluctant to sign an agreement before the election lest he be accused of playing politics with peace.

He might, however, initial it.

The agreement, according

to North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong, calls for:

- An end to all U.S. bombing in North and South Vietnam, an end to the U.S. blockade of North Vietnamese ports and a cease-fire in the South. Whether a stop to the bombing would apply to the rest of Indochina, meaning Cambodia and Laos, wasn't spelled out.

- Release of all prisoners on both sides including the Americans.

- American withdrawal from South Vietnam.

Although the calendar for withdrawal was described as "sensitive," this should be no great problem since the U.S. has only 34,000 ground troops left in Vietnam, none of them combatants.

## Added Incentive

As an added incentive to a pre-election settlement, Hanoi reportedly has offered to free all American prisoners once the agreement is signed, instead of waiting for it to be carried out.

Nixon's chief negotiator, Henry Kissinger, returned to Washington Monday after 15 hours of plainly inconclusive talks with Thieu which palace sources described as sometimes "heated."

Last night Thieu, in a nationwide broadcast, reported, the result of his talks and appealed for the support of a war-weary people.

His speech could be read two ways — as either an elaborate smokescreen to cover up an inevitable cease-fire or as a flat refusal to go along with the Washington-Hanoi agreement. Sophisticated observers were inclined toward the former view.

"We do not avoid a cease-fire," Thieu said, "but it must be a serious cease-fire. The North Vietnamese troops must go home to North Vietnam, not just withdraw to Laos and Cambodia, from which they

could renew their attacks on the South."

Thieu's terms for a cease-fire would seem to be unacceptable to the Communists. But beneath the rhetoric Hanoi and Saigon may not be as far apart as they seem.

Unquestionably, Thieu must have more guarantees of a "serious" cease-fire before he yields to the U.S. sales pitch. But privately if not publicly, Hanoi has conceded that Thieu will remain in power as head of the Saigon government.

The other "reality," as the Communists put it, is the existence of a separate Communist army and shadow government, the National Liberation Front, in South Vietnam. Thieu himself acknowledged this last night when he said:

"We are fighting against the National Liberation Front. We'll talk with the Front after the North Vietnamese troops have withdrawn."

Thieu correctly described the Communist proposal for a three-sided government as a "disguised coalition." But if the Communists mean what they say, coalition is not a precondition for a cease-fire.

The coalition would emerge, if at all, only after general elections.

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