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Saigon Sees War Near End

But Top Aide Insists on Pact Changes

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SAIGON, Nov. 13—South Vietnam's Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam said tonight that "we feel we are very close" to an agreement to end the Vietnam war but he insisted that the Hanoi-Washington draft peace accord contained "nebulous" statements that must be cleared up.

The weekend visit of White House envoy Gen. Alexander Haig, Lam said, had left the Saigon government with the hope that "all the concern and fear" that South Vietnam has been expressing about the draft agreement "could disappear after the next meeting" of U.S. and North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris.

In contrast to Lam's statement, high Saigon officials were quoted by the Saigon press today as saying that "rumors" of a peace agreement being near were unfounded.

These developments appear to suggest that the government of President Thieu has embarked on a deliberate campaign of obfuscation and confusion. Yet the position emerging from both official and unofficial statements here indicates that Saigon, while finding the draft pact objectionable, would accept it with some modifications.

"We took the opportunity" in the discussions with Haig, Lam said, "to explain our point of view about the terms of the agreement." As a result, he said, Saigon hopes that Dr. Henry Kissinger "will proceed to make the North Vietnamese understand the problem and accept new changes in the draft so that we can have a lasting and honest settlement."

At the same time, today's issue of Tin Song, a newspaper controlled by one of Thieu's closest advisers, reported that "rumors on a Vietnam agreement to be signed on a near day are completely unfounded, because the Vietnamese-American discussions did not reach any definite results." The paper attributed this information to "high level sources at the National Security Council."

The government-operated Saigon Radio said in a commentary today that as a result of his "landslide victory" in the U.S. election, "President Nixon is in the best position as to the place and time to settle the whole Indochina problem, instead of bringing about

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S. Vietnamese view the

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a partial and precarious settlement."

In a half hour speech to the mostly American Saigon Lions Club and a brief conversation with newsmen afterward, Lam said tonight:

"We all know," he said, "that this Vietnam war is irreversibly drawing to a close because of the new trend in international relations, the winding up of the cold war between the great powers which makes continuation of this bloody Indochina conflict look increasingly anachronistic and absurd."

Commenting on the nine-point peace plan revealed by Hanoi and generally corroborated by Kissinger last month, the foreign minister said: "Not only does this blueprint appear insufficiently clear in the definition of the detailed procedure to be followed and some of its terminology, it would really amount to quietly surrendering to the Communist side at the conference table what they have been unable to gain on the battlefield."

But neither in his prepared text nor in subsequent answers to reporters' questions did he specifically reject any of its provisions, except those that would leave North Vietnamese troops in the South after a cease-fire. "There are many points to be cleared up, to be put clearly in the text instead of in a nebulous way."

The tone of his address, delivered in English to an audience of about 200 that included most of the resident foreign ambassadors—but not U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who declined the invitation—was uncompromising in its denunciations of the Communists.

But in his discussion of the proposed agreement itself, Lam dwelt more on Saigon's "caution" to avoid "the too hasty erection of a shaky scaffold for an interim regime" than on rejection of specific provisions.

In summary, Lam indicated that most of the remaining questions to be settled before a peace agreement can be signed were matters of semantics, clarification, and explanation rather than of substance. The only major point on which he appeared to leave no room for compromise was the total withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from the South.

A cease-fire in place, leaving all troops of both sides where they are, would abandon the people in Communist-controlled areas "to the tender mercies of the Communists" and would be "a betrayal and a callous abdication of responsibility on our part."

He said that any final agreement should make it "unequivocally clear that North Vietnam cannot arrogate to itself the right to send its divisions rolling across the Demilitarized Zone whenever it pleases."

It is widely believed here that some compromise will be worked out that would require North Vietnam to pull back some of its estimated 120,000 troops into the North and leave the rest in pre-defined areas they now control.

Tin Song, which is for domestic consumption (unlike Lam's speech), said that "The people of the Republic of Vietnam vigorously demand the total withdrawal of the North Vietnamese," but distinguished that from the "government of the Republic of Vietnam," which it said would sign a peace agreement only when "all details are written clearly."

Tin Song also said the South Vietnamese government "vigorously opposed the creation" of the so-called National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, the "administrative structure" that would organize new elections in the South and in Hanoi's view legitimize the participation of the National Liberation Front in the government of South Vietnam.

It is in this proposal, Lam said, that the Hanoi-Washington peace plan is filled with "the greatest ambiguities."

He said that "knowing our deep-rooted allergy to the word 'coalition,' the draft agreement nowhere mentions it. But what is in a name? A red rose by any other name . . ."

He said that whether such a council had two segments—the Communists and the Saigon government—or three, including the so-called neutralists, it "would be doomed to internal fighting and paralysis from the start."

But he did not say that Saigon would never accept its creation. On the contrary, he implied that it is an accepted fact, needing only further definition of its duties and powers.

"If it is to be effective at all," he said, "our view is that the talks of the proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord would have to be confined to organizing elections under international supervision. It must be regarded and (it must) function not as a governmental structure but as an independent body free from pressure from any quarter."

South Vietnam very much wants to "end one of the bloodiest chapters in mankind's history," Lam said. "It is precisely because we want a just and lasting peace that we insist on indispensable conditions and guarantees. History provides many an example of tragedies occasioned by imperfectly fashioned treaties."

If Hanoi agreed to accept Saigon's proposed revisions in the draft agreement, sources in the Foreign Ministry said today, an agreement signed by all parties could follow, though no date could be set at this time. If Hanoi refused, then Saigon's position would be that the United States and North Vietnam could make a separate agreement between themselves and leave Saigon and Hanoi to confront each other over a settlement between the two Vietnams.

This possibility had been raised earlier by other sources, but Lam did not address it directly tonight.