

Peace Activity Seen as Throwing Thieu

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 24—The relationship between President Nguyen Van Thieu's Government and the United States has been fundamentally altered by the progress toward a peace settlement in the last six weeks, and Mr. Thieu does not seem to know quite what to make of it. The United States Embassy is saying that the allies can accept the concessions being made by the Communists because the Vietnamization policy has succeeded in defeating the enemy on the battlefield and making him sue for peace on favorable terms.

President Thieu does not appear to believe that—though he does believe that another few years of Vietnamization and concurrent heavy American air support would accomplish it—and few diplomats outside the American Embassy believe it.

Mr. Thieu's stalling on acceptance of the terms of the cease-fire negotiated earlier by Henry A. Kissinger and the North Vietnamese stems from the fundamental difference between his appreciation of the situation and that of the Americans, according to the best-informed diplomats.

The American decision to achieve a cease-fire and lay the foundations for a political settlement appears to be irrevocable. The planning for complete troop withdrawal within 60 days of a cease-fire is going ahead, civilian concerns are being awarded secret contracts to carry on aid and support after the military leave, and

Mr. Thieu is evidently resigned to having to accept the Americans' terms.

There was speculation earlier this month that Nov. 20 would be the cease-fire date. It was not—but on that day, without describing it so, the United States hastily completed the Vietnamization program by bringing in the last infusion of helicopters, fighter-bombers, transport planes, cannons and tanks.

"Vietnamization" is not even a term that American military officers here use much any more. Most seasoned military advisers have concluded that stalemate is the main achievement of Vietnamization. Many of them describe the outlines of the draft peace agreement as a sellout because they think the war is ending too soon, without the victory they believe would come—although "victory" is the word Americans are using to try to sell the cease-fire to the South Vietnamese.

The American establishment here is telling Mr. Thieu that he has won and that he has nothing to fear from the settlement. He is less than confident. In August he abolished elections at the most basic level, in the villages and hamlets, and decreed that his appointed province chiefs place men they could trust in jobs previously filled by public mandate.

Now, while the Communists talk—perhaps deceptively—of national concord, cease-fire and reconciliation, Mr. Thieu is warning of perfidy, danger and a difficult political struggle ahead. In a two-hour television speech on Oct. 24, after Mr. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser, had

come and irrevocably set a new course for the United States in Vietnam, Mr. Thieu said:

"If the Communists first violate a cease-fire by firing a pistol, we will reply with rifles. If they use rifles, we will reply with machine guns. If they use mortars, we will reply with cannons, and if they use cannons we will bomb them—there is no other way."

The compromise offered by the Communists on Oct. 8 leaves Mr. Thieu as head of the non-Communist Government in South Vietnam at the end of the fighting. So the Americans have the difficult task of implementing their new policy—complete disengagement and eventual accommodation—through the man who implemented the old policy—fighting the war.

"There is no other man around," a senior American official said before talk of a cease-fire started. He repeated the assertion with equal conviction after Mr. Kissinger's latest visit had left some doubt about whether the United States still stood solidly behind President Thieu.

The President and his Government have been operating on a single basic premise over the last few years: that they are engaged in a life-or-death struggle with the Communists and that the only way to win is to defeat them militarily and frustrate them politically.

Mr. Thieu is the man of the "four no's"—no concession of territory to the Communists, no coalition with them, no "Communist-style neutrality," no legal status for the Communists.

"As a leader of South Vietnam, I must maintain these four no's to avoid being blamed by history and by our compatriots for letting this country fall," he said in Quinhon last August. "When I cease my presidential function and return to my status as a private citizen, I will continue to defend my four no's until death."

Now he is being asked by his American protectors to let the Communists keep the territory they won in their offensive, to let them set up a legal office in Saigon and presumably in all the other principal cities, and

to trust them to help police their own cease-fire. Understandably, he has been balking—for a month now—and there has been corresponding lethargy in setting up detailed cease-fire plans.

"The Communists have never had any goodwill for peace," Mr. Thieu said a few weeks ago. "If the United States again stops bombing the North without forcing the Communists to withdraw their troops from Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam, we will fall again into the old vicious cycle."

On Oct. 24 he said: "While the Communists are begging and exploiting the United States for a cease fire to protect their military potential in both the North and the South, they still in fact have the intention of having a cease-fire without stopping the guns."

The President's Cabinet shares his fears. One of his ministers said recently: "For us

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the war is going to continue. You Americans will just withdraw and get your prisoners back, and it will be all over for you. But it's a sellout to us."

The problems of making a cease-fire work after the first 60 days and the American troop withdrawal will be largely left to the Vietnamese under the terms of the settlement as understood so far. The North Vietnamese now appear to think that Mr. Thieu will make the agreement unworkable so that they would be justified in violating it—in effect, continuing the war under a different guise.

They hope that the Americans will decide that their man for war is not the man they need for peace. That would be a change in the United States-South Vietnamese relationship far more radical than what has happened so far; it does not yet seem likely.