

An Imperfect Peace

Reports from Washington and Saigon that the North Vietnamese are planning to hide much of their army in South Vietnam in Vietcong units after a cease-fire should come as no surprise. It is only to be expected—if they agree to pull out their troops in the first place, which is not yet certain.

There is no use pretending that the agreement that Henry Kissinger has been trying to hammer into final form in Paris is likely to produce lasting peace. It can hardly do so since it fails to provide a workable formula for resolving the political issues which lie at the heart of the long Vietnamese conflict. While President Nixon and his foreign policy aide talk of peace, both sides in Vietnam are frantically making preparations to pursue the struggle.

President Thieu has made clear his intention to crack down harshly on Communist activities in the country after any armistice, threatening imprisonment or death to Communist agents. He has moved to extend military control over the Government down to the lowest level in the hamlets.

It would be naive to assume that the Communists do not have plans of their own for continuing the fight, once the remaining American forces are gone. If the settlement does not permit North Vietnamese troops to remain in their present unacknowledged positions, it is inevitable that many will simply melt into the South Vietnamese countryside, as they have done in the past. Such a dispersal, or even fresh infiltration through the porous Laotian and Cambodian borders would be virtually impossible to police. This is one reason why Canada and Indonesia are so reluctant to join the proposed international commission to supervise the cease-fire.

One can hope that the Vietnamese, left to their own devices, will soon find a way to reach an accommodation that will finally end decades of bloodshed. But it is too much to expect a tidy end to a messy war.

About the best that Mr. Kissinger can hope to achieve is a period of grace in which to extricate remaining American troops and prisoners from the conflict. For that the American people would be thankful. They should not be misled to expect much more.