

Thieu Urges Truce

DEC 1 2 1972

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-- And New Talks

Prisoner Exchange Offered

Washington Post Service

Saigon

President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam proposed today a Christmas holiday truce during which North and South Vietnam and the Viet Cong would begin separate peace negotiations.

President Thieu said the Saigon government is prepared to release all North Vietnamese prisoners in exchange for the liberation of American prisoners before Christmas.

In a one-hour-and-15-minute address to a joint session of the National Assembly, he asked that "all the Vietnamese parties" in the war "hold consultations to discuss every problem of mutual concern, to lay the foundation for conducting serious and useful negotiations, to conclude a peaceful settlement to the war and restore peace, on the military as well as political questions, including the problems between the two zones and between the South Vietnamese themselves."

In excerpts prepared by the government and distributed to the press in English, the following phrase was underlined for emphasis: "This truce can be extended for a further duration as agreed by all the parties" if the consultations "progress in an encouraging way."

DRAFT

Thieu made no direct mention of the Paris peace talks under way between North Vietnam and the United States, but as a preamble to his truce offer he reiterated South Vietnam's uncompromising stand on all the points it has found objectionable in the draft Hanoi-

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Washington agreement.

Except to confirm that South Vietnam has offered to reduce its armed forces by the same number of North Vietnamese troops who would be withdrawn from the South, the President said nothing that would indicate any flexibility in his principal objections to the agreements.

He insisted that there can be no peace without a total pullout of Hanoi's forces and rejected the proposals in the draft Hanoi-Washington agreement for political arrangements and elections after a cease-fire. He repeated the proposal he made late in October, after the draft agreement has been made public, that the United Nations supervise a referendum to determine the views of the South Vietnamese people, with subsequent arrangements depending on the results.

RULE

Contrary to expectations, Thieu did not use the occasion of his first address to the Assembly in two years to announce any changes in his government or to seek an extension of his authority to rule by decree, which expires Dec. 28.

To "show its utmost good will" in offering the proposed truce, Thieu said, South Vietnam "will unilaterally release first and with-

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out any conditions 1015 Communist North Vietnamese disabled and healthy prisoners of war on the first day of the truce."

There are 9800 North Vietnamese prisoners in South Vietnam, according to official sources. Hanoi is known to hold 429 American POWs.

Similar prisoner exchange offers have been made in the past with no results, because the North Vietnamese have refused to acknowledge the presence of their troops in the South and therefore have not participated in arrangements to repatriate them.

REACTION

The immediate reaction among Western diplomats and journalists who heard the speech was that Thieu was offering too little too late in an effort to "Vietnamize the peace talks" and forestall any agreement in Paris to which he would be forced to capitulate.

The prospects for North Vietnamese acceptance of his offer were regarded as very slim.

In thinly veiled criticism of the U.S. role in Paris, Thieu said that "if South Vietnam falls, all Southeast Asia will be under Communist control."

South Vietnam, he said, is

ready to assume the responsibility and burden" of defending itself, "but we ask for assistance. The U.S. should assist small nations in this part of the world to defend their freedom.

"If the United States does not play a leading role in the free world, the free world will be in the hands of the Communists."

OBJECTONS

That belief that the Communists cling to their "dark scheme" and plot to take over, Thieu said, is what underlies his objections to any peace plan that would leave North Vietnamese troops south of the demilitarized zone or recognize a "second government" within South Vietnam.

Thieu said, "there can be a truce for a significant duration to begin before Christmas day and to end after the New Year of 1973, during which all parties agree to stop all military offensive actions."

During that period, he said, "two concrete and useful actions can easily be taken." The first would be to "exchange the prisoners of war to be repatriated in time for Christmas." The second would be for "North Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam (Saigon) and the National Liberation Front" to "hold consultations to discuss every matter of mutual concern."