

Saigon Calm Despite Signs Truce Is Near

By Thomas W. Lippman
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Dec. 15—South Vietnam went crisply about its business today, just as if no shoe were ever going to drop in Washington or Paris. But the government's efforts did little to dispel the prevailing view here that the United States and North Vietnam have reached agreement on a peace settlement that is unacceptable to Saigon but unlikely to be modified any more.

Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem journeyed to the mountain resort city of Da Lat to preside over a graduation ceremony at the national military academy.

A high ranking government delegation, including Cabinet members and legislators, went to Quangnam Province in the north for the formal unveiling of the first chapter of the new Democracy Party, a national political party organized under the sponsorship of President Thieu.

Thieu met with U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker for 45 minutes, presumably to discuss the suspended Paris peace negotiations.

The state-controlled Saigon Radio broadcast an editorial warning the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong that "our army, our police organization and all of our people are ready to cope with any Communist attempt to avail themselves of the period of a possible cease-fire to infiltrate and mix with the population in remote areas to try to carry out their projects for elimination of nationalist elements . . ."

In short, it was a day like any other over the past seven weeks since the time that chief U.S. negotiator Henry Kissinger said that "peace is at hand."

The whole program fitted in comfortably with the current official line in the Thieu Government, which is that everything is all right, that the United States has fully understood Saigon's objections to some provisions of the original peace agreement and is pressing for changes to accommodate its ally. This is said to be the cause of the apparent stalemate in Paris.

Identical Views

An official government spokesman said this morning that "basically our views on a peace agreement are identical to the views of the U.S." and "we are not dissatisfied with our relations with the U.S."

Apparently believing that the United States was finding North Vietnam intransigent, Thieu Tuesday reiterated Saigon's opposition to any accord that leaves North Vietnamese troops in the South or sets up any form of coalition government but asked for separate negotiations between his government and the Communists.

However, Western diplomats and some Vietnamese political observers tend to discount the official view and believe that it is Thieu, not the North Vietnamese, who is at odds with the U.S. negotiators.

Saigon has strongly denied a report that Thieu told legislators and military leaders in a private session Tuesday that Washington had reached agreement with North Vietnam without winning concessions Thieu considers important and that it had presented the agreement to South Vietnam as a fait accompli.

But if Thieu did not tell the legislators that, he left many of them thinking that was what he meant.

One Per Cent

Thieu told us he asked for changes in the draft agreement, but it was only changed about 1 per cent because the U.S. and North Vietnam had it all worked out," said one legislator who was present. "He said that if we (the South Vietnamese government) sign the agreement that means we swallow poison and death comes very soon. If we do not sign, it means we will die slowly."

Saigon Radio broadcast a commentary along similar lines two nights ago but listed a third alternative—to continue the war, which it said could be done with U.S. assistance. This was in line with Thieu's public remarks to the National Assembly Tuesday, when he said South Vietnam was prepared to carry on its struggle if the United States would continue to help.

Half a dozen Western diplomatic analysts interviewed over the past two days said they see the situation more or less in the same way—that is, Thieu believes the United States and Hanoi

have reached agreement between themselves, but that he cannot and will not go along with its terms.

According to this view the question now is what to do if Thieu refuses either to sign the agreement or to let the United States sign it on his behalf—which some analysts here are convinced is his real position.

Thieu has also said many times, that if he does not sign any settlement or authorize the U.S. to sign for him, South Vietnam will not be bound by its terms.

Mutual Assumption

The initial assumption that this was bluster for public consumption and that the United States could bring him to heel has given way to the view that Washington miscalculated Thieu's determination not to approve any peace agreement that failed to meet his two fundamental requirements—no North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam and no coalition government, disguised or otherwise.

Some Vietnamese sources have suggested that there will be de facto cease-fire, in which the United States and Hanoi will make a separate arrangement between themselves and Thieu—who has already proposed a truce—can go along without committing himself to anything in terms of a political settlement. Thieu's speech on Tuesday was seen by some observers as a preparation for this possibility.

Analysts here believe that this would be unacceptable to the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front and Provisional Revolutionary Government, because it would deny them the recognition they would leave the NLF dependent on Hanoi while leaving Thieu independent of the Americans, at least in political terms.

But there are signs that North Vietnam is prepared to go ahead with a separate agreement of this kind.

The most notable was an article in the November issue of the North Vietnamese theoretical journal Hoctap. Among the article's comments were these: "A clear understanding of the situation must first of all rely on the balance of forces between our side and the enemy. An important task is to divide the enemy force and the utterly isolate the main and most dangerous enemy." This is believed to refer to an arrangement to get the United States out of the war and leave the South Vietnamese to carry on alone.

" . . . Sometimes we must accept a certain agreement with the enemy which must be based essentially on a revolutionary stand that is aimed at weakening his forces and increasing our forces," the journal said.

This article is viewed by some as a message to the NLF that it will have to settle for something less than full recognition as a second or parallel government in South Vietnam, at least until after the Americans leave and the struggle resumes. As late as yesterday, the Vietcong's Liberation Radio broadcast a message saying that "with the consent of our government, North Vietnam has worked out a peace agreement with the United States."