

# 'Peace at Hand' -- Dying Goes On

By Mary McGrory  
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Washington

When the "Peace is at hand" negotiations were suspended in late October so nobody would think they were politically timed, Madame Binh, the chief Viet Cong negotiator, asked a rhetorical question:

"Do the American people know what one more week of war means to the Vietnamese people? Do they know what one more minute of war means?"

Last week, for instance, it meant that 378 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed, and 1400 wounded, according

to Saigon, 1734 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong died in battle.

Since peace was "at hand" on October 26, over 5000 air strike sorties have been flown over North Vietnam. The total "air-delivered allied tonnage" — as the Pentagon calls bombs — for both Vietnams was 94,000.

Eighty - thousand new refugees fled to camps which cannot take care of them. We have sent the South Vietnamese 600 new planes, but there is no room in the carriers for food. According to a staff aide of the Senate refugee subcommittee, many of the South Vietnamese are starving. The refugee situation is worse today than it was in 1965, when there were no camps at all.

## CIVILIANS

The number of South Vietnamese civilian casualties, from bombing or shelling, is in the neighborhood of 22,000. Not all report to the government hospitals, or are reported.

In a document addressed to the State Department inspector - general, a field worker partially explained

the inexactness of civilian casualty figures.

"If the data showed that large numbers of civilian casualties were caused by bombing, which is entirely done by the government of South Vietnam and the United States, it could indicate that too many bombs were falling on inhabited areas, and it might lead to military decisions to reduce the bombing of such places."

A great public silence about the war has fallen on the country. The war is forgotten, peace dominates the front pages. No one mentions the "air-delivered allied tonnage."

## 'HOAX'

No political figure, since George McGovern charged that the agreement was an election-eve "hoax" and "fraud," has been heard from. Senator Edward M. Kennedy, a leading critic of the war, with special concern for civilian casualties, chose this week to offer co-operation to the President.

Politicians explain that they felt any comment would be inappropriate while Kissinger was negotiating in Paris. On October 26, he said one more session of two or three days would do the job. But after 15 days, he has come home empty-handed. LeDuc Tho has returned to Hanoi.

Nobody asks why. The fear of having the rug pulled out from under them is more acute now than ever for dove senators. Since the election mandate, "negative criticism" of the President is considered bad form.

President Thieu, has of course, had a great deal to say. Most recently he made a frivolous Christmastime offering to American public opinion of a holiday truce. The White House rejected it.

Kissinger has been confiding to friends in the press that with Saigon, the discussion is back to square one.

Thieu, overlooking the standstill cease-fire negotiated by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, is demanding all the territory held by his country at the beginning of the war.

Kissinger rather desperately renews his hints of a separate peace with Hanoi. Thieu seems unimpressed.

He knows that Nixon wants his name on any treaty. Various cosmetic moves are made to keep hope alive. "Technicians" are left behind in Paris to iron out details. One hundred Vietnamese - speaking State Department employes are put on notice of imminent departure to Saigon to oversee the onset of "a generation of peace."

Halloween, the North Vietnamese said, was a good day to sign the cease-fire accord. Saigon said December 15. Surely by Christmas? Maurice Schumann of France said he had heard it would be January 3.

Inauguration Day? The wisest say Richard Nixon will insist on it by then. But will he if it means abandoning Thieu? The President is a stubborn man.

He is now free of all pressures except his own obsession about how the war should be concluded. If he cannot win over Thieu, if the South Vietnamese leader does not sign, the North Vietnamese, deceived again, might once again take their case to the battlefield.

President Nixon could then point to "naked aggression," unleash new hell from the air, and vow to stand firm. The American people, to answer Madame Binh's question, may know what the war means to the Vietnamese people, but THEY have peace at home, and Richard Nixon knows that that means more to them than burning villages and dying people half a world away.