

WASH POST

DEC 21 1972

# Haig Leaves Saigon Amid Hopeful Signs

By Peter Osnos

Washington Post Staff Writer

SAIGON, Dec. 20—U.S. presidential envoy Maj. Gen. Alexander Haig left here today after two days of talks amid signs that the Saigon government is moving to a greater understanding of the U.S. position in the peace negotiations.

Haig delayed his departure by about four hours to confer for half an hour with South Vietnamese President Thieu. Haig had spent three hours with Thieu on Tuesday.

After today's session with the South Vietnamese president, Haig left for Vietniane, Laos, the next stop on his mission of briefing friendly Indo-Chinese leaders on the status of the negotiations.

U.S. embassy spokesmen offered no explanation for the scheduling change, and dismissed speculation that Thieu had deliberately kept Haig waiting while the South Vietnamese president conferred with his National Security Council.

The only semi-official word on the talks came from the newspaper Tin Song, which often expresses the views of Thieu. It said Haig had carried a letter from President Nixon containing the U.S. position on Thieu's proposal last week for an experimental cease-fire and an exchange of prisoners.

## Idea Rejected

The proposal was rejected by the Communists and U.S. spokesmen have made it clear that Mr. Nixon did not think much of the idea either.

Haig's visit was overshadowed by the resumption of heavy U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and the loss of at least three giant B-52 bombers to enemy fire.

But there were signs of a shift in the South Vietnamese attitude toward the peace negotiations.

That shift, according to well-placed Vietnamese sources is simply the result of a grim awareness that the United States is going to extricate itself from the war soon, even if South Vietnamese objections must be overridden and even if the latest timetable has been thrown off.

"You must not underrate Thieu's sense of realities," said one Cabinet minister.

"Nobody can say Nyet forever."

## Thieu Resigned

Thieu, these sources said, is now resigned to the continued presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South because basically, he has no choice. Given the American view expressed by Henry Kissinger last weekend on this point, sources said, Thieu has quietly backed down.

At a news conference Saturday Kissinger confirmed that

the United States had not espoused Thieu's demand for a withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from the South, and said that none of Mr. Nixon's cease-fire proposals of the past two years called for North Vietnamese withdrawal.

On the other hand, the South Vietnamese president is said to be heartened by the American insistence that the sovereignty of South Vietnam be somehow assured in the agreement, the central sticking point in the stalled negotiations.

The United States is insisting that the accord affirm the existence of two Vietnams, separated by the Demilitarized Zone, while Hanoi maintains that Vietnam is one country, only temporarily divided.

"We cannot accept the proposition that North Vietnam has a right of constant intervention in the South," Kissinger said in his week-end press conference.

## Sidestep Issue

Although still seeking guarantees of survival, some members of Thieu's entourage believe that the best means of handling the "one Vietnam-two Vietnams" question may be to sidestep it altogether and simply have the accord leave the future situation up to the Vietnamese themselves.

"If China and the Soviet Union agree to reduce military aid to Hanoi," said one palace source, "and you Americans reduce military aid to us, then perhaps real discussions among Vietnamese could begin."

"The big powers should publicly encourage those talks," he said.

This view holds that the negotiations between Washington and Hanoi are nothing more than a cover for an American disengagement and a return of POWs leaving all other matters generally the same as they are now.

"There will be a lesser degree of hostilities," said one member of Thieu's staff, "but there will still be confrontation. The big powers could make certain that there would be no more large unit fighting and talks begin."

China and the Soviet Union, the South Vietnamese argue, at this stage are more interested in safeguarding their detentes with Washington than having the Vietnam war continue. The current American bombing, according to this reasoning, is a renewed effort to have Moscow and Peking intervene with Hanoi and speed an acceptable settlement.

The South Vietnamese believe that an accord endorsed by all the big powers would permit political discussions first in the South and eventually in the North as well.