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Mystery of Bombing in the North

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 21—The mystery of the bombing of North Vietnam and of the failure of the Paris peace negotiations is darkest here, in Saigon, the center of it all.

Today was a typical day. The United States command which, according to informed civilian officials is intentionally being kept less than fully informed

News about the current bombing strikes—
Analysis is maintaining a policy of silence

about all details of the bombing except to confirm that it is going on and to release information about downed B-52's and other planes after rescue efforts have been completed.

The South Vietnamese Government is maintaining a policy of silence about its role in the peace talks or its reaction to the bombing. It appears, however, that the Government authorized the circulation of a rumor that the United States had issued an ultimatum to Saigon as well as to Hanoi threatening a cutoff of all military and economic aid unless South Vietnam agreed to a peace settlement.

A Kissinger Fable

The Government's role in planting the story is indicated by the fact that identical versions of it—a sort of fable about how Henry A. Kissinger was trying to treat the two Vietnams like two small boys, spanking one and threatening the other—were circulated this morning to selected members of the Saigon network of Vietnamese interpreters and part-time reporters for foreign newspapers. The sources were identified only as "Government officials." Most of the interpreters did not identify them to their offices.

The office of President Nguyen Van Thieu's press sec-

U.S. Silence Spurs Rumors in Saigon
—Facts Few

retary, Hoang Duc Nha, describe the report once it had appeared on news agency wires as "speculation," and said, "We do not comment on speculation."

Informed Government officials said the report sounded plausible to them—after all, Mr. Kissinger, the American negotiator in the private talks with North Vietnam had said only a few days ago that the United States would not be prevented from reaching an accord with Hanoi by objections from Saigon—but one Cabinet minister emphasized that he had not heard of the actual existence of such a threat.

The American Embassy here refused to comment on the report.

What is known?

Thieu Told of U.S. Plans

It is known here that President Thieu was informed several days in advance that Washington would resume the bombing of North Vietnam's heartland if it had not come to a settlement by early this week.

It is known that the American Embassy, and one semi-official representative from Washington, Senator Charles H. Percy, Republican of Illinois, have told the South Vietnamese government that Congress would be very reluctant to provide economic and military aid after it reconvenes next month if there has been no peace settlement by then.

It is known that President Thieu has been making plans for weeks to prepare public opinion in South Vietnam for a compromise peace settlement—

including plans to make it sound as though he had no choice but to accept.

Not much is known about the bombing. Why is this, since it is American planes that are doing the bombing?

Jets Based Outside Vietnam

The most compelling reason is that all of the planes are based in areas inaccessible from Saigon. Another reason is that B-52's, which are heavily involved this time, are not under the United States military command in Saigon, but the Strategic Air Command, and are based in Guam or Thailand.

Navy fighter-bombers are flying missions over the North from aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin, but the Navy refuses to fly correspondents to the carriers now and both the Navy planes and the Air Force fighter-bombers in Thailand report directly to Pacific headquarters in Honolulu and to Washington, and only secondarily to the United States command in Saigon.

The air bases in Thailand are normally closed to the press and military authorities there never release information on air strikes, which they say is the job of the command in Saigon.

The command here—formally known as the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—has held no background or on-the-record briefings on the current operations except to confirm that they are happening. What information is reported in the press comes from private interviews with military officers who are not usually accessible.

But a civilian official said of the military command a few days ago, "Don't blame MACV for the blackout. Washington has ordered that they get only a small part of the total picture, so that's why they aren't telling the press much either."

So rumor and speculation are the hardest bits of news coming out of Saigon.