

Americans Deny Reports Of Ultimatum to S. Vietnam

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By Peter Osnos

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SAIGON, Dec. 21—Informed American sources denied today reports that presidential emissary Maj. Gen. Alexander Haig carried an ultimatum to President Thieu that U.S. aid would be cut off if Thieu rejects a cease-fire agreement acceptable to Washington.

At best, these sources said, Thieu may have misinterpreted, possibly deliberately, a message that Americans have been giving him for weeks: Resistance to a settlement will make congressional appropriation of funds for South Vietnam highly doubtful.

Thieu, who watches the American scene closely himself, has been warned about congressional repercussions by, among others, Henry A. Kissinger, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill.) and Haig, according to American officials.

Furthermore, these sources said, "Thieu recognizes the realities" of what his resistance would mean to an American public determined to bring U.S. involvement in the war to a close. No ultimatum is necessary to make the point.

For several hours this morning, reports were circulating among newsmen here, apparently inspired by aides to Thieu, that President Nixon had delivered an ultimatum to Saigon—accept or else.

A spokesman at the presidential palace said the reports were "speculation" but did not deny them outright.

Thieu's purpose in having the story circulated, diplomatic observers here believe, was to reinforce the impression locally that he faces insurmountable American pressure to accept a cease-fire accord that does not meet all South Vietnamese objections.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Thieu accepts the inevitability of a settlement (or at least

American disengagement) and "key to the coffers," said one prominent Saigon politician. He wants to be able to say he did his best to get terms acceptable to his supporters.

"The Americans hold the

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"We know we must go along with what they tell us."

In his public pronouncements, Thieu has been intransigent and privately, say informed Americans, he has steadfastly demanded assurances that his regime be assured the reasonable chance to survive about which Mr. Nixon has so often spoken.

When the matter finally comes to a head, Americans and Vietnamese agree, Thieu is prepared to adopt some formula that will not estrange him from Washington.

For example, sources close to Thieu say that he has quietly resigned himself to the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South after a cease-fire, although the possibility of this was one of his principal objections to the original draft accord.

The apparent easing of Thieu's attitude may shift again if the current deadlock in the negotiations ends, some Americans fear.

"One of the things that makes it possible for him to relax a little," said one source, "is that we're not on the verge of signing anymore."

In any event, today's reports of the alleged ultimatum illustrates the kind of rumor and misinformation that is rife in Saigon these days.

Only a tiny handful of Vietnamese and American officials have any real idea of what is going on and even they often disagree among themselves, if they will talk at all. Publicly, no one will say anything.

"A cease-fire is still imminent," one Cabinet minister confided to a reporter yesterday. This morning, he summoned the newsmen again and said, "Well, maybe it's not. I'm really not sure."

Compounding the paucity of reliable information on the negotiations, is the continuing refusal of the U.S. Command to provide details of the renewed bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. All the daily communique says is, "During the 24-hour period ending at 0800 today U.S. crews conducted bombing operations against military targets in North Vietnam."

The loss of planes is reported after the search missions for the crews are completed, but the numbers of raids conducted, specifics on the targets and preliminary damage assessments are being withheld as a matter of policy. The purpose, a Command spokesman told newsmen, is "protection of information."