

Americans Say Thieu Knows He Needs Help

By Peter Osnos

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SAIGON, Dec. 27—Authoritative U.S. sources said here today that Saigon's objections do not pose an obstacle to reaching a peace agreement in Vietnam because President Thieu realizes that the survival of his government depends on U.S. financial support.

"Thieu knows his government can't exist without our support anymore than Hanoi can exist without Soviet and Chinese support," one ranking U.S. official said. "If Congress cuts off funds, they [the Saigon government] say they'd go it alone, but how can they?"

Two of Thieu's three objections to the original draft accord reached by Washington and Hanoi will be adequately dealt with in the prospective settlement, according to the sources. The two issues involve the status of the Demilitarized Zone and the power of the proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord.

But Thieu's third objection, his opposition to the presence in the South of North Vietnamese troops, has been overridden, as White House adviser Henry A. Kissinger said in his Dec. 16 press conference. The United States evidently has also turned down Thieu's proposal for mutual demobilization of North and South Vietnamese troops.

The U.S. sources expressed the belief that North Vietnam has "fundamentally taken the decision" to reach a settlement of the war and what remains is a "question of timing." Although the present stalemate could "drag on for several months," these sources said, there will eventually be an agreement on a cease-fire.

Thieu has received guarantees, according to American officials, that the United States will "react" if North Vietnam takes advantage of its presence in the South to violate the cease-fire agreement. Presumably, those guarantees refer to the use of U.S. air and naval power still

within striking distance of Hanoi in Southwest Asia.

Just what would amount to a sufficient violation of the accord to merit such a reaction is not clear. As one senior American official put it, U.S. intervention would be in response to an infraction against the "intent" of the agreement "rather than the letter."

In other words, the official said, the United States would be prepared to tolerate assassinations of village chiefs and other scattered terrorism in the cease-fire period, but would not permit "large scale troop movements" of company size or better.

Thieu, other officials said, has also been encouraged by American emissaries to have more faith in the strength of his regime. "Militarily," said one ranking American, "there is no question of the GVN's [Government of Vietnam] ability to handle a cease-fire situation." In an election, this reasoning goes, the Saigon government's agents would outnumber the National Liberation Front's by "ten to one."

Moreover, American officials contend that Saigon has profited from the delay in reaching an agreement. The South Vietnamese have been busily engaged in the countryside with a widespread propaganda campaign and political drive aimed at preparing for the struggle ahead.

The Communists, these sources contend, surfaced all over the country in late October in the mistaken belief that a cease-fire was about to start. In the military clashes that resulted, officials maintain, the Communists suffered heavy losses and were driven out of many of the hamlets they had occupied.

"The GVN is in a much better position than they were two months ago," said a senior American, "they [the Communists] don't have as many

leopard spots as they did before." Hamlets are the "leopard spots" of a standstill cease-fire.

In any event, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong still control considerably more now than they did before their offensive last spring.

According to the latest figures compiled for the U. S. mission, there are 885 Vietcong-held hamlets now, compared to seven just before the start of the offensive. The total number of hamlets in the country is about 12,000.

These figures do not include the large areas of the country that are contested and the unpopulated mountainous areas in Communist hands.

For all the assurances and badgering Thieu has received, and even though he may have benefited from the postponed agreement, U.S. officials are still not prepared to say that Thieu will definitely approve or sign the accord in its final form. "We didn't sign the Geneva Agreement in 1954," said one senior diplomat, "but we said we'd respect it. We've signed other treaties with demurrers."

Despite the suspension of the peace talks, the U.S. mission here is going ahead with its "contingency" preparations for a cease-fire, officials said. For the most part the planning on paper is completed, they said, and could be put into effect "rapidly" once an agreement is reached.

Senior Americans deny that the embassy was preparing to carry on the American role inside the country by all means short of firepower once the fighting subsides. They said that reports of 10,000 civilian American advisers to replace military men were "grossly exaggerated, greatly overstated."

The U.S. mission will have "a lot to do in reconstruction efforts, a lot of reporting on how the cease-fire is working," said one source. "We would have to do advising on the economic situation, on refugees and on rehabilitation."

The present American apparatus would be dismantled, he said, and "we would obviously reorganize like a normal diplomatic mission." He acknowledged, however, that enough civilian contractors would be brought in to "keep in shape" South Vietnamese military equipment.