

Decision Enables Both Sides To Return to October Terms

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By Murrey Marder

Washington Post Staff Writer

The decision by President Nixon to discontinue the extremely punitive bombing of North Vietnam in exchange for "serious negotiations" enables both sides to move back toward their October terms for a war settlement that were shattered in early December.

Each side inevitably claimed in effect yesterday that the other bowed to its conditions for resuming negotiations.

The Nixon administra-

tion's cryptic statements served to create the implication that the United States had "bombed North Vietnam back to the bargaining table."

North Vietnam's own cryptic statements implied

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that Hanoi, by demanding a halt to "extermination bombing" as the condition for new negotiations, has made the United States comply with its terms.

It was the United States that on Dec. 13 broke off the negotiations between presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger and North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho on grounds, as Kissinger publicly charged on Dec. 16, that Hanoi was making "frivolous" demands, which turned the bargaining into a "charade."

North Vietnam's insistence that the extraordinarily heavy B-52 bombing must halt before talks could re-

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sume was made only last weekend, as the prolonged, massive bombing took a heavy toll in the Hanoi-Hai-phong area.

On the facts available, it is impossible to judge whether the unprecedented intensity of American bombing compelled North Vietnam greatly to reduce its demands for a settlement in the Kissinger-Tho talks now set to resume in Paris on Jan. 8. Many independent experts doubt that. They doubt that this even was President Nixon's real expectation. It is unlikely, these specialists believe, that President Nixon counted on the bombing "to bring North Vietnam to its knees."

Instead, it appears to many specialists that the prime purpose of the bombing was to inflict exceptional damage on North Vietnam in order to reduce its war-making capacity. Additionally, the specialists believe the bombing was undertaken to convince South

Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu that he could more safely risk a continuing military-political struggle with the Communists that is certain to follow an imperfect war settlement between the United States and North Vietnam.

Even though the Nixon administration insists, as Kissinger stated on Dec. 16, that it will not allow President Thieu "a veto over our actions," the struggle for American disengagement from the war continues to be three-sided bargaining among Hanoi, Washington and Saigon.

If the bombing in fact was essentially for the purpose of gaining added time and reassurance for President Thieu's regime, then the possibility for achieving a compromise settlement on a relatively loose cease-fire agreement in the next round of Kissinger-Tho talks appears strengthened. But if President Nixon is determined to try to achieve a tightly-knit violation-proof cease-fire settlement of the war, a so-called "lasting

peace," the negotiations could be endless.

Many administration officials privately concede their uncertainty about which course the President is on. This was the reason the alarm even inside the ranks of Republicans in Congress began to break into the open last week.

President Nixon cannot have been surprised by either those outbursts or the clamor of indignation raised around the world over the sight of the mightiest nation pouring mass devastation on one of the smallest. The deadlines all have been fully apparent, with Congress reassembling on Wednesday, and with the President's Jan. 20 inauguration date automatically raising expectations for fulfilling the hopes raised so high for a cease-fire settlement.

The date now announced for resuming the Kissinger-Tho talks will ease, but not eliminate, the domestic and international pressures weighing on the President to produce an American exit from the war.