

Minh Eyes Return to Politics

DEC 30 1972

By Peter Osnos

Washington Post Staff Writer

SAIGON, Dec. 29 — Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh, the best known figure in South Vietnam's non-Communist opposition, said yesterday for the first time that he is prepared to participate actively in politics after a cease-fire.

In an interview arranged at the suggestion of Minh' advisers, the general spoke out with uncharacteristic verve on the plight of his country and made what was for him an unusually forthright statement of his intentions.

Asked if he would join the political struggle certain to

follow a cease-fire, the general replied, "If necessary." Asked what the conditions would be to make his participation necessary, the general answered in English and with a broad smile, "very easy."

Minh volunteered, however, that he does not believe peace is "so near." And when a cease-fire does come, he said, the peace will not be genuine because it will have been "imposed by the Paris talks" rather than agreed among Vietnamese.

Aside from an occasionally guarded and vague public statement, General Minh has been virtually inactive in politics since August 1971 when he withdrew from the presidential campaign charging that President Thieu had rigged the election.

Since that election, Thieu's once vocal critics have been floundering more than ever, hampered by the president's stringent controls on the levers of power, but lacking also any important personage to gather around.

Minh's presence in the "neutralist" segment of the tripartite National Council of Reconciliation and Concord envisioned in the draft agreement drawn up in October by Washington and Hanoi, would give his opposition group badly needed luster in the contest for popular influence that is sure to come.

The "third force" or neutralists in South Vietnam are actually a disparate and fractious assortment of religious and political groupings who agree on very little except their objections to both Thieu and the Communists.

Minh said, as he has in the past, does not have the support of the people and therefore will be unable to compete with the Communists when the time comes.

"The people," he said, "aren't for the Communists, they are not for the government. They are waiting."

He acknowledged that his own supporters have been little heard from, but said that was deliberate because any antigovernment demonstrations now would "play into the hands of the Communists."

"The people," he said, "cannot move to the left or to the right, so they make no move."

Then Minh belittled President Thieu, his one-time subordinate in the South Vietnamese army.

"What does Thieu represent? Nha? Quang?" Minh asked while three of his advisers seated around him on the terrace of his villa chuckled.

Hoang Duc Nha is Thieu's 30-year-old American-educated cousin who has emerged as the president's closest aide, sitting in on all talks with

American emissaries. Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang is an old crony of Thieu's whose title of special assistant for military affairs conceals his real power as the president's chief operative.

Certainly, Minh went on, Thieu does not have the support of the army, "or else why does he have that barbed wire all around the palace? It is not the Vietcong because Thieu has said they are not in Saigon."

The biting tone of Minh's remarks, interspersed with genial chortles, was a departure from the general's usually restrained and careful manner with visitors. He even managed a quip on the very delicate subject of coup d'etats.

Was he planning to overthrow Thieu, the general was asked.

"Oh no," Minh retorted. "A man is entitled to only one coup in a lifetime."

In 1963, Minh led the coup that overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem, a move that made him the popular figure he still is today. Minh stayed in power only a few months and later went into exile, but he has never lost standing among the Vietnamese as a fatherly man more given to peace than war, despite his military career.

Yesterday, Minh greeted his visitors on the open verandah of his spacious government-supplied villa off a tree-shaded street in downtown Saigon. The session, a 2½-hour breakfast, was conducted to accompaniment of doves cooing. The general keeps the birds as pets.

In discussing the future, Minh avoided any specifics on his plans but he said that before a political struggle with the Communists is possible, "it is imperative to have a government which is popular, elected and supported by the people."

Then, Minh recalled that he had run in the 1971 election to provide the people with the opportunity for that kind of popular government. He clearly left open the possibility that he would do so again.

Among some Americans with long experience in Vietnam and professed understanding of its people, Minh's name has been mentioned again lately as a hope for future leadership. Their disillusionment with his indecisive and clumsy performance in the presidential race has largely faded, they say, because Thieu has become more entrenched, more isolated and less in touch with popular will.

In Minh, and not for the first time, these Americans see the hope for something better.