

Nixon bombed to buy more time for Saigon, hurt Hanoi war effort

WASHINGTON—The real purpose of President Nixon's draconian decision to unleash American bombers over Hanoi and Haiphong last month was to buy more time for Saigon and cripple Hanoi's war making potential, not to "force" North Vietnam back to the bargaining table.

Whether the savage aerial bombardment will in the end have those effects is still undetermined. However, the objective evidence so far is that it will.

Thus, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu is singing a different tune today than he was on Oct. 20, when he kept Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's chief foreign policy adviser, cooling his heels in Saigon for almost 24 hours.

At that time, Thieu's intransigence was total. Today, Thieu is letting it be known that, even if he regards a cease-fire agreement between Washington and Hanoi as unacceptable, he will abide by its terms with or without his own signature.

One explanation for this most important change in Thieu is the fact that North Vietnam's major cities have now been devastated with an estimated several hundred thousand civilians evacuated to the countryside. Another reason, also derived from the renewed bombing, is that Thieu now has had almost three full months to propagandize his own country and prepare it for the radically different political situation that will follow a cease-fire.

Accordingly in terms of relative strengths, North and South Vietnam have been on reverse courses: Saigon strengthened both by Thieu's political activity and the addition of huge amounts of new U.S. arms; Hanoi weakened under the most remorseless pounding from the air in history.

The full effect of that aerial bombardment is still not known, but an editorial in Hanoi's Communist party newspaper, Nhan Dan, broadcast through North Vietnam two days ago, gives a shuddering glimpse.

"In the recent days of fierce fighting," the editorial said, "tens of thousands of compatriots in Hanoi . . . have left the

city. . . Our urban compatriots understand that evacuation is aimed at creating conditions for our armed forces to fight and win. Let each of us endeavor to implement the policy according to which only people required for combat, combat support, production and communications and transportation activities remain in the cities."

The "duty" of the rural provinces, the editorial continues, "is to serve the people properly by supplying them food, foodstuffs, and staple goods so that the evacuees can stabilize their lives quickly."

Although couched mostly in flat, bureaucratic prose, the editorial hinted at the tensions and panic produced by the bombing. Thus, political cadres "have cooperated in motivating the compatriots to evacuate and in assisting families in their travel."

Beyond that, longtime Hanoi-watchers here strongly suspect that Hanoi knew the bombing would halt as a precondition for the new round of Paris talks. On the basis of its past actions, Hanoi would not have risked blocking all chance of more negotiations without hard knowledge that Mr. Nixon had put a terminal point on the bombing.

Consequently, with Thieu softened up by more time and arms and with Hanoi softened up by the devastation of bombing, the prospect of Kissinger finally reaching agreement at Paris within the next three weeks is better than 50-50.

But Hanoi still has one ace in the hole: the possibility--still less than even--that the new Congress might undercut Kissinger's bargaining power by imposing a fund cutoff for all aid to Saigon.

Thus, if there is any logic left in the decisions of the principal actors in America's longest war, the latest round of negotiations in Paris should be the final round. If it is not, Mr. Nixon will confront an excruciating dilemma: he could renew the bombing at the risk of alienating U.S. allies, probably forcing cancellation of his plans to visit Europe next spring. Or he could sell out Saigon, something he has sworn never to do.