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Political Arrests Expected

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SAIGON, Jan. 17 — President Thieu has given his province chiefs wide latitude to make political arrests after the coming cease-fire and has also empowered them to "shoot troublemakers" on the spot, reliable South Vietnamese sources said today.

Wherever possible, American sources added, those arrested are to be charged with common crimes instead of political ones because, it is acknowledged, the prisoners are easier to deal with that way. The Communist demand for release of all political prisoners has been a sticking point in the Paris negotiations and the government's intention, sources said, is to keep the number of prisoners down, at least on paper.

Thieu's hard line is in keeping with his conviction that, after the cease-fire, his government will remain at war with the Communists by all means short of big-unit firepower. "The Communists are preparing to destroy the cease-fire," a Thieu aide warned a gathering in Kientuong Province yesterday.

Government officials in the provinces say they have been told the Communists will violate the cease-fire with terrorism and assassinations and they must be ready to protect themselves.

Thieu's response to this danger is evidently to harass and intimidate known and suspected Communist sympathizers, as they have been for years.

The province chiefs have been instructed, South Vietnamese sources said, that the only condition of the arrests is that local prosecutors be informed within 24 hours. Once that is done, the sources said, the suspects can be detained for as much as six months.

Because of the vagueness of the way it is worded and the uncertainty of how the situa-

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tion after the cease-fire will develop. South Vietnamese officials have no clear idea of how the authority to "shoot troublemakers" will be interpreted.

During his one-man presidential campaign in 1971, Thieu gave police officials permission to shoot anyone causing a "disturbance," but the threat was never carried out. Recently, Thieu authorized police to shoot thieves caught in the act, but that, too, has never been done, as far as is known.

The broad arrest powers given to province chiefs apparently differ from past practice in that there is to be no direct coordination from Saigon, as was the case, for example, with the campaign of arrests after last spring's Communist offensive. Top-level American officials, who say they are informed even on the most sensitive aspects of Thieu's preparations for the period after the post-cease-fire, insist that there is no similar national plan for widespread political arrests.

They did acknowledge, however, the existence of a plan called F-6 that went into effect after the start of North Vietnam's Easter offensive and was again carried out when a cease-fire appeared imminent in October. They said the plan finally expired just before Christmas.

The number of civilians arrested in organized, military-style sweeps was 26,000, according to one senior U.S. intelligence source, of whom 14,000 have been released.

What set F-6 apart from routine political arrests was its scope and the change in the standing practice that had required three separate accusations of a suspect before he was picked up. Under F-6, now ended, only one accusation—a casual denunciation by an aggrieved neighbor, for instance—was all that was needed for an arrest.

Government critics have charged that the arrests were often used as a means of extortion by police, who then sold the prisoners their freedom. There are also recurring substantiated reports of harsh interrogations and even torture.

Among the thousands of those arrested, American sources said, most were simply

Vietcong sympathizers or relatives rather than the active agents that are the target for the Phoenix program, directed against the Communists political infrastructure.

Phoenix, which was revised by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1967 and is now under the direction of the Vietnamese police Special Branch, will apparently continue unchanged after the cease-fire.

It is not known as yet

whether province chiefs will again have to obtain three accusations of Communist links before arresting civilians, but Vietnamese sources believe there will be virtually no restrictions placed on what is done in the name of political security.

The number of political prisoners at present is thought to be around 30,000. The Communists say there are several hundred thousand.