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Formal Talks Suspended In Expectation of Accord

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PARIS, Jan. 18—The four-year-old Paris peace conference on Vietnam was suspended today after its 174th weekly meeting, in anticipation of what participants hope will be the final private negotiating round between Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho.

Mr. Kissinger, President Nixon's adviser on national security, and Mr. Tho, a member of the Hanoi Politburo, are to meet here Tuesday. The White House and the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris announced jointly that the purpose was to "complete" agreement on ending the war.

None of the parties involved would explain why they had set no date for another four-sided formal session. But their comments implied that they were waiting to see whether a final accord has been reached by next Thursday, the normal meeting day.

Wants Record in 'Palm of Hand'

The North Vietnamese press spokesman, Nguyen Thanh Le, said he would see reporters on Thursday, indicating that he would have something to say by then regardless of whether a meeting took place.

"This is a moment for prudence for you, for us and for world opinion," he said.

Asked about prospects, he said quietly, "One cannot be sure until peace is not 'at hand,' but in the palm of the hand."

At a news conference on Oct. 26, Mr. Kissinger said that only "one more round of negotiations lasting no more than three or four days" would be necessary and that "peace is at hand." There have been three long rounds of negotiations since then, interrupted by 11 days of heavy United States bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area of North Vietnam.

Assurances Are Avoided

It seemed evident that while an agreement was nearly ready, there were still some final points to be worked out and all parties were being extremely careful to avoid giving premature assurance that they would succeed next week.

There have been many reports of an imminent peace, Mr. Le said, but the United States "is continuing its aggressive war and we still do not have peace."

South Vietnam's delegate, Nguyen Xuan Phong, said, "All the parties must concentrate on overcoming the last difficulties and agree to make a new effort. After the rain there is always the beginning of good weather."

In his formal speech, prepared before the meeting today, Mr. Phong said, "We have reached a point in the negotiations where we can already see the prospects of peace. We must strive to overcome the remaining difficulties by displaying not haste, but patience, calmness and readiness to make the necessary additional efforts."

Heyward Isham, the United States delegate, said "recent developments" gave "grounds for encouragement" and that "negotiations, seriously undertaken by both sides, continue."

Mr. Isham spoke of the "negotiating tasks still before us," a reference to the renewal of the Kissinger-Tho talks.

Last week he had said that the formal conference would have a new role "having to do with implementing responsibilities."

This week, he said the formal sessions would in future concentrate "on the processes of transition from war to a negotiated peace."

While there was no official word on just which points remained outstanding, a South Vietnamese exile in Paris who has close contacts with both North and South Vietnamese officials here said he understood that the problem now was on "matters of form."

A British source who met yesterday in London with two South Vietnamese officials on a special mission for President Nguyen Van Thieu said he understood that in addition to several other high Saigon officials, Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam would soon be coming to Paris.

Mr. Lam would presumably be authorized to initial and perhaps sign an agreement if one is definitely reached. The October draft agreement provided for signing by foreign ministers.

The travelers to London are Tran Van Do, a former Foreign Minister, and Bui Diem, a former Ambassador to Washington. They plan to return to Paris, where a large number of Saigon officials are beginning to converge.

The South Vietnamese Ambassador to London is coming here, also former Senator Tran Van Don, who has often undertaken special missions for Mr. Thieu, and a military mission headed by the commander of the National Defense College, Gen. Vinh Loc.

The British source said that while the South Vietnamese visitors did not say so explicitly, they gave him the impression that President Thieu was now prepared to go along with all the main principles of the agreement. The visitors were "very gloomy and depressed," he said.

The delegations of technical experts working out side documents to be attached to an agreement met here again today for six and a half hours. Another meeting is scheduled for tomorrow.

At the formal conference today, there was unusual moderation and restraint.

The conference, in the ballroom of the former Majestic Hotel on Avenue Kléber, has often served as a forum for endless repetition of propaganda and exchange of insults in the four years of meetings.

But when serious negotiations are in progress, or when one side or the other wishes to signal a desire to resume secret talks, the meetings have reflected developments. Often, the signals have come in complex phrases, almost a code.