

The Political Struggle

By Anthony Lewis

PARIS—In thinking about the cease-fire in Vietnam, Americans quite naturally wonder whether the enforcement apparatus will be swift and effective enough to stop Communist violations. But it is important to recognize that the other side has its own interest in enforcement of the Paris agreement.

The truce was made possible by a Hanoi decision to move essentially from a military to a political contest in the South. But the North Vietnamese are acutely aware of what happened the last time they trusted to a political campaign in the South—after the Geneva agreement of 1954. Ngo Dinh Diem repressed the opposition and arrested the Communists, and mutual violence grew.

Henry Kissinger always understood that the peace terms would have to deal with this concern. He wrote in 1969 that Hanoi could not be asked to leave her southern allies "to the mercy of Saigon."

A revealing insight into Hanoi's current view of the problem was provided in a talk here with Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien, a leading North Vietnamese intellectual. Dr. Vien is editor of a historical series, Vietnamese Studies. He came to Paris just after the Christmas bombing of Hanoi to help edit a French film on the history of the war and to do some research of his own in French archives.

Dr. Vien was optimistic about the chance for real peace now, and confident of his side's political prospects in the South. He based that confidence on three factors: his estimate of popular feeling in South Vietnam, the strength of the "revolutionary army," and the role of the international truce observers and world opinion generally.

"Every family in South Vietnam has a political prisoner under [President] Thieu," he said, "even the functionaries. The family has seen its village destroyed, its daughters living an American way of life. During the war they were too frightened to do anything about these things. But there will be a change in the climate now.

"Thieu will oppose many things in the accords, for example the provision for free movement between the two zones in the South. But people will really want that; it is essential to normal life. So resentment could build, a popular feeling to make Thieu carry out the accords.

"And there may be people inside Thieu's Government who want to carry them out."

Dr. Vien emphasized that things were different now from 1954.

"This time, unlike then," he said, "there are a revolutionary army and

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political movement in the South. The Americans tried in the Paris talks to have the South divided and the two armies regrouped. We wanted a cease-fire in place, leaving bits of the army everywhere to protect the population.

"There will be incidents. If people demand their right to move freely, province chiefs may order the police to fire on them. But the revolutionary army will never be far away, and that will be a constraint."

He saw a particular responsibility on world opinion to protect Saigon's political prisoners and enforce the Paris agreement's call for their release. He expressed concern for their safety after all American and other military prisoners are supposed to have been released, sixty days from now.

"It will be extremely dangerous for the political prisoners then," he said. "Some will be liquidated, or hidden, or falsely charged with common crimes such as robbery. Thieu has arrested many more in the last few days, including Catholic priests."

As is the case with the Vietnamese Communists, there was a certain ironic serenity in his political view of the future, the more striking because few of the rest of us can have confidence about anything in Vietnam.

"The old class structure in the South has already been destroyed," Dr. Vien said. "In the village there used to be proprietors and peasants. Now the village is abandoned. Everyone has fled to the town and become equal. The line is now between those who benefited from the war and those who did not. The South has been swept clean. In a way you have to thank the Americans."

In a column last week I disputed the argument that American bombing of Hanoi could be justified by the precedents of Dresden and Hiroshima. "Britain and the United States were both attacked first in World War II," I wrote, "Britain savagely bombed and the United States hit without warning at Pearl Harbor," and even in a war for survival, the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima was widely criticized.

Readers have pointed out that Britain declared war when Poland was invaded, before she herself was attacked. It remains the case that Dresden was bombed long after the savage German air assault on British cities. But in terms of the declaration of war, the statement was of course in error.