

Saigon Turns the Guests Away from a Vietcong Party

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SAIGON, Feb. 15—The Vietcong delegates in Saigon tried and failed today to break out of the isolation that has been imposed on them by the South Vietnamese government since their arrival almost three weeks ago.

They threw a party in their compound at Tansonnhut air base and invited a dozen or more American and European newspaper correspondents. But no one from the press attended because the South Vietnamese military police refused to let correspondents in to the compound.

The brief confrontation appeared both trivial and ludicrous, as the police confiscated the invitations and shooed the reporters away. But it dramatized some serious issues that have arisen since cease-fire day. The virtual house arrest of the Communist delegations, the harassment of the press and the public relations clumsiness of the Saigon government.

The North Vietnamese and Provisional Revolutionary government (Vietcong) delegations to the four-party Joint Military Commission created by the Paris agreement are housed in an out-of-the-way compound at Tansonnhut known as Camp Davis.

Their representatives there and at regional headquarters around the country have been almost totally cut off from direct contact with the press and the South Vietnamese public. They leave the air base only under armed escort for the few items of official business that must be transacted outside the gates, and access to Camp Davis is barred by the police.

Only Telephone Contact

Both delegations have telephone contact with the outside, but there have been no substantive face-to-face conversations. Communist officials who are not members of the military delegations have been interviewed in Vietcong-controlled zones and have been elaborately polite and talkative.

The Communists had been expected to put Saigon's restrictions to the test, and today they made their move. Through sympathetic Western channels, they distributed invitations to a "cocktail party" to mark the "12th anniversary of the unification of the South Vietnamese Armed Liberation

People's Forces," which means the founding of the Vietcong as a military command.

The invitations were issued in the name of "the Military Delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam to the four-party central Joint Military Commission." They said that the party was to be held at Camp Davis. There was even an RSVP phone number, reachable through the switchboard of U.S. military headquarters.

This ploy left the Vietcong in a position in which they had everything to gain and nothing to lose, no matter what the government did. If the Saigon authorities permitted the press to enter Camp Davis, the Vietcong would be polite and loquacious, and their comments would be duly reported by correspondents attracted by the sheer novelty of attending a Vietcong party in Saigon.

If the government refused to relax the rules and let the press attend, the Vietcong would once again have appeared as the friendly and rea-

sonable force frustrated by an intransigent government that interprets the Paris agreement its own way.

The Saigon authorities chose the latter course. This was consistent with the Thieu government's policy of trying to block all professional and personal commerce with the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, whether in Saigon or in Communist-controlled zones in the countryside.

In Saigon this has meant a series of incidents at Tansonnhut in which reporters have been detained and had their credentials confiscated for trying to talk to the Communists.

Outside Saigon, the government has attempted with limited success to block reporters from visiting Vietcong-controlled zones. Vietnamese nationals working as interpreters for Western news agencies have been threatened with imprisonment for visiting Communist areas. Correspondents have been publicly warned that they may be expelled if the government does not like their work.

A this afternoon's regular daily briefing, reporters who had been invited to the Vietcong party asked if they would be permitted to go to Camp Davis.

Military Security Applies

The answer was no. "The delegation is living inside a military compound and all rules and regulations of military security will apply," said Pham Duong Hien, the official government spokesman.

He said that until all four parties of the Joint Military Commission reach unanimous agreement on how to handle their relations with the press, "there is nothing we can do to help you."

Then followed another of the question and answer sessions on this issue that have become part of the daily fare at the press briefings.

What about the provision of the peace agreement saying that "the Joint Military Commissions and their personnel, while carrying out their tasks, shall enjoy privileges and immunities equivalent to those accorded diplomatic missions and diplomatic agents?" What about the provisions requiring freedom of movement and commerce between the two zones? If nothing can be done without a unanimous decision of the four-party commission, why can you give daily briefings on cease-fire violations when they cannot talk to the press?

The answers all boiled down to the government's refusal to grant access to the Communist delegations unless there is a unanimous decision of the Joint Military Commission—of which Saigon is a member—permitting it.

Press Thought Hypercritical

A high-ranking government official, in a private conversation, made clear that the real reason for the government's policy is a deep and durable mistrust of the Western press, which the government feels is favorable to the Communists and hypercritical of the Thieu administration.

"We have never recognized the PRG as a government," he said, "so they have 'diplomatic immunity' only in the performance of their duties. That does not mean they can come out and go to the market. Each side wants to interpret the agreement in its own way, and you must grant us the right to do so, too."

The official's view about the

Western press and its coverage of Vietnam are widely shared in the U.S. establishment here, especially the military, where officials make their feelings plain in a variety of ways.

Reporters covering the release of U.S. prisoners of war the other day, for example, were guarded by U.S. police dogs and escorted to the toilet

five at a time by a U.S. Navy officer — a phenomenon ascribed to security reasons.

Hardly anybody on the U.S. government payroll, military or diplomatic, ever says anything for attribution, and people like Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, military commander Gen. Frederick C. Weyand and Maj. Gen. Gilbert N. Woodward, head of the U.S. delega-

tion to the Joint Military Commission, hardly ever talk to the press at all.

American officials who were asked today to assist the press in getting into Tansonnhut to attend the Vietcong party refused on the usual ground that it is now a Vietnamese base, even though it is still U.S. military headquarters.

Gen. Woodward and his col-

leagues were invited to the party by Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, head of the Vietcong delegation, but they replied that they "would be unable to attend." No reason was given, but one source said "What the hell did you expect? Look at the occasion for the party. I mean, let's face it. . ."

A spokesman for the PRG

delegation said after the party that the only people who attended, aside from the North Vietnamese, were leaders of the Polish and Hungarian delegations to the International Commission of Control and Supervision. The Indonesian delegate reportedly tried to go but was turned away by the police.

PRG officials had said earlier in the day that they expected the press to have difficulty in going to Camp Davis but urged them to try it anyway. Tonight, the spokesman replied "of course" when asked if his delegation would protest the incident at a meeting of the Joint Military Commission.

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