

More Minus Than Plus

After Month of Vietnamese Cease-Fire, Balance Sheet Is Heavy With Failure

NYTimes

By SYLVAN FOX

Special to The New York Times

FEB 28 1973

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 27—A month after the signing of the Vietnam peace agreement the balance sheet on it is heavily weighted with failure.

There have been a few positive aspects, of course: United States troops

News
Analysis

are leaving Vietnam in a steady stream; American pris-

oners have been freed from Communist captivity, although even this aspect has now bogged down in angry dispute; the fighting, while still con-

tinuing, has diminished, at least temporarily.

Measured against the terms of the agreement, so meticulously negotiated during months of haggling, the events of the last month have fallen far short of the outline for peace.

Neither peace nor the effective machinery for maintaining peace has taken a firm grip on South Vietnam.

Of primary concern is the continuation of the fighting, which, after all, is what the agreement was supposed to end. After tapering off during the first 10 days, the fighting flared again and continued to rage until about a week ago, when it started another decline.

Informed American officials continue to exude optimism about the prospects for the end of the hostilities. They describe what is happening as

Continued on Page 8, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

the heaving of the sea after a storm, or, as one official put it, the last paroxysms of the war.

Yet no one denies that the fighting has gone on far longer than the peace agreement or those charged with implementing it foresaw. By Government count since the cease-fire began Jan. 28, more than 8,000 Communist soldiers and almost 1,500 Government soldiers have been killed. That is about half the number killed in the North Vietnamese offensive of last spring; it hardly suggests a country at peace.

How much longer will the fighting last?

A week or 10 days, according to American officials. By then, one said, he expects to see little more combat. American officials made such a forecast with equal conviction two weeks ago, and they were wrong then.

As another Western source put it, no one is certain why the fighting has continued for so long. It continues, he noted, "because neither side wants it to stop."

Some informed officials attribute the fighting to the fuzziness of control in contested areas, and they say that once those areas are more clearly defined militarily—which they report is happening—the fighting will end.

"The Vietnamese Government is determined to return to the status quo ante and they're doing it," a source said.

Whether the Communists will accept that "status quo ante" and cease hostilities when it is reached is anyone's guess, although American analysts say there are indications that, because of pressures from the current Paris conference and from the changing great-power alignment, the thrust of events is in that direction.

Machinery Not Working

Another clear failure under the Paris agreement has been the peace-keeping machinery it established.

There are two peace-keeping bodies in the South — the International Commission of Control and Supervision, composed of Canada, Hungary, Indonesia and Poland, and the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, consisting of representatives of the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Vietcong. The latter commission ceases to exist in a month, to be replaced by a two-party commission — South Vietnam and the Vietcong.

The Control Commission is

charged by the Paris agreement with supervising the cease-fire rather than preventing violations as such. Its members interpret that to mean that they are supposed to investigate alleged violations but not try to interpose themselves between the two sides.

The result has been that while the commission itself has functioned rather well, without bogging down in what one source called "sterile cold war exercises," it has remained essentially impotent with regard to the cease-fire.

The problem, according to the commission's members and those close to it, is not that the 1,160 men at its disposal do not constitute a large enough monitoring force. The problem is that the commission's interpretation of the Paris agreement so limits its function as to prevent it from taking any active steps to stop the fighting.

Almost Permanent Obstacle

Thus the commission members believe that, under the terms of the agreement, they must wait until the fighting ceases before launching investigations of violations. If the fighting remained at its present relatively low level, the commission, by this logic, could never begin to function in any real sense.

Even on this score the Americans are not pessimistic, however. They concede that, as one put it, the commission's effectiveness is "still more potential than actual," but they contend that its international luster will tend to reduce the fighting and permit it to function eventually.

Whether the Americans are correct or not, the Control Commission has moved far slower than expected.

A month after the cease-fire began, teams were supposed to be posted and functioning in seven regional offices and 26 subregional sites around the country. They are in all the regional offices but in only 14 of the subregional ones, and even in those they can hardly be described as functioning.

As slow as the Control Commission has been in fulfilling its mandate, the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, which bears fundamental responsibility for ending the hostilities, has been even slower. It was supposed to have 7 regional teams and 26 subregional teams in place by the end of the first month, but it has fallen far short.

American and South Vietnamese members are in all regional headquarters and subregional sites, according to an American source; the North

Vietnamese are in the regional sites and in 6 of the subregional offices; but Vietcong representation is absent from 2 of the 7 regional headquarters and all of the subregional offices.

The effect has been to render the Military Commission almost as ineffective as the Control Commission. Aside from working out the first release of American and Vietnamese war prisoners, the Military Commission has been unable to compete a single investigation of the thousands of cease-fire violations alleged on both sides.

In those instances where attempts were made to get it involved in investigations—for example, the downing of an American helicopter near An Loc—it bogged down in dispute and mutual recrimination.

Its sole major accomplishment, with half its life over, has been the issuance of an urgent appeal to the opposing commands to stop hostilities. The appeal produced no dramatic halt in the fighting, which continued, though at a somewhat lower level.

For all the negatives, the Americans remain supremely confident, at least when they are talking with journalists.

"Is the cease-fire working?" a well-informed official asked rhetorically. "It's not working, in the sense that people are shooting at each other. But if you ask me whether the trend is such that one can have confidence in the future, my answer is yes."

"This thing has to work," he

added. "We're assuming it will work."

The assumption may be more wishful than real, for there is nothing in Vietnam's long history of chaos and conflict, or in the long history of failed efforts to restore peace, to suggest that the current attempts will succeed, and there is much to suggest the opposite.

The optimistic Americans insist that conditions in Vietnam and in the world have changed. They point to new relationships between the great powers, to the increased capacity of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, to what they consider the failure of the Vietnamese offensive of last spring, to the altered role that the United States plays in South-east Asia.

"We're leaving," an American official explained, "and it's clear to the entire world—clear even to Thieu—that we're not trying to create a truculent anti-Communist force here any longer."

At best, however, the warfare and hatred that have prevailed for decades are not going to subside quickly despite the elaborate timetable of the Paris agreement. At best, even the most optimistic Americans concede, improvements are likely to come slowly and arduously.

"I don't think anything in Vietnam has ever gone according to our timetables," remarked a reasonably optimistic American official.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST!