

Vietnam Peace Hope Dim As the Last G.I.'s Leave

By SYLVAN FOX MAR 29 1973

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 28—The 60-day first phase of the Vietnam cease-fire came to an end today with fighting continuing, peace-keeping machinery in a state of disarray and the prospects for real peace in South Vietnam apparently remote.

The end of this phase is being marked by a momentous turning point in Vietnam's history: the complete withdrawal of American troops after more than eight years of intense involvement.

In the view of many Western and Vietnamese officials, this turning point does not mean that peace has come.

"The cease-fire isn't working," said one highly placed

Western diplomat in summing up the critical two months since the Paris peace accord was signed. "It hasn't been implemented as it should have been."

"There certainly has been no cease-fire," said a high-ranking American official who only a few weeks ago predicted that the fighting would soon end. "The best we have is a significantly reduced level of fighting — but we have had these lulls before."

"The thing is," still another well-informed Western official commented, "there's a war on."

The situation has recently deteriorated so seriously, in the

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view of these and other Western and Vietnamese sources, that the expectation now is an upsurge rather than a decline in the fighting and a seemingly endless prolongation of the war.

At the heart of the new concern and fear is the evidence that the United States says it has collected showing that a heavy infiltration of weapons and supplies by the North Vietnamese is taking place along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network into South Vietnam.

Limited Offensive Foreseen

"My belief is that they would not send this stuff down if they didn't expect to use it," an American analyst said. "I think what they plan to do is have a limited offensive in the next few weeks."

"Rather than withering away," another official said wryly, referring to Henry A. Kissinger's comment about North Vietnamese troops in the South, "they are getting stronger."

Two months ago the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Vietcong signed an agreement in Paris "on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam." President Nixon declared at the time that "peace with honor" had been achieved.

During the 60 days that followed, the United States was supposed to withdraw all its troops from Vietnam, and North Vietnam and the Vietcong were supposed to release all American prisoners of war. Those objectives are being achieved.

For Some It's Over

If, as some observers argue, the principal aim of the Paris agreement was to extricate the United States from the Vietnam war, it seems to be succeeding. For the United States and for North Vietnam—which is no longer the target of American air attacks—the war has ended.

But if the agreement also sought — as its articles and protocols state — to restore peace in Vietnam, then the record is a litany of almost uninterrupted failure:

¶The fighting in South Vietnam, which was supposed to be ended by the agreement, continues to flare—although at a relatively low level for the moment—long after American officials expressed certainty that it would come to a virtual halt. Saigon and the Communists accuse each other of violating the cease-fire without regard for either the letter or the spirit of the agreement.

¶Potentially even more threatening to future prospects for peace in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese have allegedly sent 40,000 fresh troops, 300 tanks and hundreds of artillery pieces into South Vietnam since the signing of the agreement, which expressly forbids such shipments. The Communists deny these allegations, charging that they are "a ruse by the United States to cover up" its own illegal shipments of arms to South Vietnam.

¶The peace-keeping machin-

ery created by the Paris agreement has proved to be helpless—it has neither stopped the fighting nor established blame for its continuation. The Four-Party Joint Military Commission, which bore the primary responsibility under the agreement for bringing about a real cease-fire in the first 60 days after the accord was signed, never manned more than a fraction of its assigned sites around the country and now goes out of existence without functioning as the peace-keeping body it was designed to be. The International Commission of Control and Supervision has bogged down in ideological splits between Hungary and Poland on the one hand and Canada and Indonesia on the other and has had no significant impact on reducing the fighting.

Thus neither peace nor any real mechanism for bringing peace has been attained. However, the picture is not without bright spots.

A large-scale exchange of prisoners arranged between the Saigon Government and the Communists, involving some 27,000 men in Government captivity and almost 5,000 in Communist hands, has been completed.

As the Joint Military Commission goes out of existence at the end of this week, a Two-Party Joint Military Commission composed of Saigon and the Vietcong Provisional Revolutionary Government appears ready to begin meeting, although no one is especially sanguine about its capacity for restoring peace in light of the record of the four-party commission.

In addition, representatives of Saigon and the Vietcong have opened talks in Paris aimed at creating a National Council of national reconciliation and Concord to supervise elections and resolve the political future of South Vietnam.

Some newsmen and opposition politicians attach great importance to these talks, noting that they mark the first time the two South Vietnamese sides have actually sat down to discuss political differences. However, others, including some South Vietnamese, express strong doubt that the Paris talks will produce concrete results.

Hatreds Run Deep

"The differences between the two sides are so great and the hatreds run so deep," a South Vietnamese source explained, "that I believe the talks will ultimately break down."

Regardless of how the talks fare, the tentative first steps in search of a political solution to South Vietnam's problems do not alter the reality of the last 60 days, which have been marked by continued conflict on the battlefield and in the conference rooms. Taking the elements of the situation separately, they shape up this way:

In the fighting, according to Saigon's count, a total of more than 15,000 Communist troops have been killed since the cease-fire began. The Government says its casualties have been more than 3,000 men killed

and more than 15,000 wounded. In addition, it says, more than 400 civilians have been killed and 1,300 wounded.

Saigon charges that the Communists have committed more than 3,500 violations of the cease-fire. The Communists say Saigon has been guilty of thousands of "nibbling operations." Regardless of the truth of either side's claims, the fighting continues. And it is no longer diminishing, as it was a few weeks ago.

In the first six weeks after the cease-fire went into effect Jan. 28, there was a series of increases and decreases in the level of military activity. American analysts repeatedly asserted that these peaks and valleys were following a generally downward trend that would, within a short time, virtually end the fighting. They now concede they were wrong. As one official put it, the fighting is "on a plateau right now, I'm afraid." Another American analyst went even further; he expects an increase in the fighting.

"I think we are going to see another significant escalation some time in April," he said.

This official asserted that the North Vietnamese had more and better equipment in South Vietnam today than they had a year ago, when they launched their spring offensive.

Big Guns in South

He said the equipment the North Vietnamese now had in the South included large numbers of 130-mm. and 122-mm. artillery pieces and 57-mm. antiaircraft guns. He added that the 130-mm guns, with a range of 17 miles, could cause Saigon's troops "great grief."

Where North Vietnam is weaker than it was a year ago, he said, is in the number of combat-ready troops it has available in the South. "I don't think they have the strength for a sustained offensive," he went on "but they do have the capability for major attacks that could take over individual places easily."

Saigon Eases Curfew And Lifts Nightclub Ban

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 28—Despite the continuing dim outlook for peace in Vietnam, a certain relaxation has begun to appear in the austere life of the country as the first two months of the cease-fire come to an end.

Recently the 11 P.M.-to-6 A.M. curfew was reduced by one hour so that people are now permitted on the streets until midnight.

And yesterday, the Government announced that nightclubs—closed as an austerity measure since the Communist offensive last spring—would now be permitted to reopen, that the ban on dancing imposed at the same time would be lifted and that the Saigon racetrack, also closed a year ago, would reopen April 1.

The purpose of such action, in the view of this analyst, would be to establish "a plausible base" for the Provisional Revolutionary Government, which, in his opinion, is now "without much real substance."

Isolated Shelling Attacks

As for the current fighting, much of it consists of isolated shelling attacks. There are some assaults on Government outposts by the Communists and attacks by Government troops on Communist positions. There is some skirmishing for hamlets and some attempts by the Communists to cut roads or by the Government to open them.

More significant than the fighting itself at the moment is the failure of any peace-keeping machinery to stop it.

One of the many specific instances in which the peace-keeping machinery broke down was the case of the alleged installation of missiles by the Communists at Khe Sanh.

According to the United States and Saigon, the Communists installed three missile sites at the former American Marine base in the extreme northwest corner of South Vietnam. The Communists denied the allegation and the United States asked the control commission to investigate. However, the Hungarians and the Poles refused to approve the investigation and the commission, which requires unanimous decision to act, was paralyzed.

Warning from the U.S.

On March 1 the Communists, under extreme pressure from the United States, reportedly withdrew the missiles. But on March 21, according to the United States, the missiles were back in almost the same spot, bringing another stern warning from the United States that it would take "necessary action" if they were not removed.

Throughout this dispute the peace-keeping machinery remained essentially irrelevant. It was similarly irrelevant when the South Vietnamese charged that two of their small outposts were under siege and called upon the Joint Military Commission to halt the fighting in the two areas.

The commission took no action because its Communist members denied any violation at the two outposts, Rach Bap, about 22 miles north of Saigon, and Tong Le Chan, about 50 miles north of the capital.

Commission Moves Fast

Saigon then asked the International Control Commission to step in and investigate the situations at the two outposts. With surprising dispatch it agreed—but equally swiftly, the Hungarians and Poles refused to participate in any investigation until the fighting had stopped and it was safe to do so. They said the Communists had refused to guarantee the safety of the investigators.

With the peace-keeping machinery again paralyzed, Saigon announced that it had sent a regiment of men supported by tanks and aircraft to lift

the siege of Rach Bap. It forces encountered no resistance and the siege was ended. But as one Western diplomat pointed out, the only reason the incident did not erupt into major fighting was that in this instance the Communists chose to withdraw when faced with the prospect of a large-scale attack.

"That kind of solution," one diplomat said, "is war, not peace."

Sporadic shelling of the other besieged base at Tong Le Chan is reported continuing.

Going Through the Motions

If the International Control Commission has been unable to play any direct role in reducing the fighting, as one official put it, it at least "went through the motions" of deploying its teams around the country as mandated by the Paris agreement. In one case, however, at Tri Ton, the Hungarian and Polish representatives left when the site came under Communist shelling.

The Joint Military Commission never even got that far. It was supposed to deploy peace-keeping teams to seven regional sites and 26 subregional sites in order to halt fighting and to monitor the cease-fire.

In the end, the military commission had not fully deployed except at four regional sites. The United States and the South Vietnamese sent their commission delegates to all seven regional sites and to all 26 local sites, but the North Vietnamese manned only five regional sites and four subregional ones. The Provisional Revolutionary Government never manned any subregional sites and had representatives at only four of the regional bases.

By the time the 60-day term of the Joint Military Commission had ended, neither the North Vietnamese nor the Vietcong were at any subregional sites, the North Vietnamese had withdrawn from the site at Ban Me Thuot after its delegation was attacked by a rock-throwing mob and, after similar incidents, it withdrew from the three other subregional sites it had staffed at Hue and Danang.

Result Is Complete Failure

The result has been the complete failure of the Joint Military Commission to function as a peace-keeping body.

The Four-Party Military Commission held what was described as its final meeting today, according to an American spokesman, although speculation has persisted that its life might be extended. It was understood that the United States had been seeking such an extension, but South Vietnam has strenuously opposed the idea publicly and North Vietnam and Vietcong reportedly have opposed it in private. At today's meeting the commission was unable to agree on a communiqué summarizing its two months of activity.

The commission's only significant contribution to the cause of peace in Vietnam, except for working out the release of the prisoners and the withdrawal

of American troops, has been the issuance of an appeal early in the cease-fire for the immediate end of hostilities. The appeal had no discernible effect.

What does it all add up to?

In the opinion of a high-ranking Western official—not an American—"the war will go on and on and on."

"The only way I can see peace coming," this experienced diplomat said, "would be a surrender by the South."

"I have no evidence that the North has given up its design to reunify the country," he said, "and there is no indication that they are prepared to delay this to do it by peaceful means."

Like many other officials interviewed, this diplomat said he expected continued low-level fighting for an indeterminate period, followed by a major offensive by one side or the other.

One well-informed official was more cautious about the outlook.

"I think in the next six months or a year," he said, "a decision will be made. Either the Communists will opt for a major military solution or they will decide to seek a political solution. But I don't think they've really made that decision yet."