

Long Way From Peace

Two Sides in Vietnam Are Stepping Up Both the Fighting and the Accusations

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 31—There is a strange gap of perception between those who live in Vietnam and many public figures who talk about it from a distance.

President Nixon, Secretary of State Kissinger, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee — to mention only the most prominent — persist in

speaking of the Vietnam war in the past tense. Last Friday, for example, Mr. Nixon

asserted that "we brought peace to Vietnam, something we haven't had and didn't for over 12 years." Before the United Nations last month Mr. Kissinger, declaring that "the uncertain peace in Indochina must be strengthened," said: "The world community cannot afford, or permit, relapse into war in that region."

But from here the question seems to be whether the uncertain war will degenerate into a more certain one.

In the last month the tit-for-tat fighting that has prevailed since the January cease-fire has taken on a new tone and a new scale. Simultaneously, both sides have become shriller and angrier in their denunciations and accusations.

President Nguyen Van Thieu has been touring the country warning that the Communists are preparing for a spring offensive and has been telling his commanders to stage preemptive strikes against menacing formations.

Retaliation Ordered

At the same time the Communists have given orders to their troops to retaliate at "any place and in appropriate forms and forces." Last week the North Vietnamese military newspaper, Quan Doi Nhan Dan, accused the Thieu Government of "towering crimes against the people of South Vietnam" and threatened "heavy blows" in return.

Both sides have been notching up their military actions.

The North Vietnamese, who wiped out a ranger camp west of Pleiku on Sept. 22, have continued to attack in the Central Highlands and are reported to be infiltrating their division-size 470th Transportation Group across to the coast.

The South Vietnamese Air Force has been striking repeatedly in Binh Dinh, on the central coast; in the strategic region north and northwest of Saigon and, most recently, in Chau Doc Province, on the Cambodian border, a long-time infiltration corridor.

In several battalion-size engagements — notably in Tay

Ninh and Dinh Tuong Provinces — the South Vietnamese Army has been badly bloodied.

Throughout the country the Communists have begun to make key arteries less secure, blowing up bridges, mining trains and attacking outposts. The South Vietnamese believe that this is a sign that their "economic blockage" of Communist-controlled areas is taking hold; before the blockage, they say, the Communists had an economic interest in keeping the roads open.

Truce Body Powerless

The International Commission of Control and Supervision, though newly bolstered by the Iranians—who replaced the frustrated Canadians—remains powerless to arrest the spread of the fighting.

"People have got to understand that we are not an international police force," said a high-ranking commission member recently. "There has to be a common ground for discussions, and right now it doesn't exist."

President Thieu has never had any real interest in engaging in the complex, high-risk "political struggle" suggested by the Paris agreements—a triangular arrangement between his supporters, the Communists and the neutralist "third force." And the Communists, while willing to try the political struggle, were hardly prepared to abandon their military options.

All of that intransigence has led to political stalemate—and more war.

There is still no consensus in Saigon's diplomatic corps over the Communists' intentions for the coming dry season. While partisans of a 1974 "go for broke" offensive are not hard to find, Hanoi watchers have not yet detected the psychic mobilization that has preceded past offensives. Moreover, draft calls in the North do not appear to be running above normal.

Heavier Fighting Foreseen

"It's a little soon to be shifting into a new phase," a diplomat commented. "They have just been telling their people that the Paris agreement is a great victory for peace." But this analyst, like others, believes that spring will see even heavier fighting and a further shredding of the already notional "cease-fire."

In Paris and Washington one can find geopolitically minded diplomats who believe that Mr. Kissinger has in fact worked out understandings with Peking and Moscow that will keep the

fighting below the level of all-out offensive.

However, diplomats and other observers in Saigon tend to consider the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong partners fairly independent of their superpower suppliers—certainly as independent as, say, the Egyptians. So the discussion here centers not on "if" the Communists will launch their offensive—merely on "when."