

Saigonese Glum Over More War

By James M. Markham
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Saigon

The people of Saigon, who once thought that there might be peace, are now being told that there is going to be much more war.

Over their television sets and radios, they hear President Nguyen Van Thieu telling them in his blunt, unadorned Vietnamese that they must steel themselves for a Communist offensive.

When they believe him — and some do — many react not in panic but with a profound lassitude and numbness, something almost beyond caring.

"Listening to all this talk about another offensive, the only thing I feel is very sad," said Long Hai, the owner of a small ceramics factory in Hang Xanh on the northern outskirts of Saigon.

Hang Xanh was obliterated by American and South Vietnamese planes after Viet Cong troops took it during the Tet offensive of 1968. The ceramics factory was destroyed, and Hai fled with his wife and eight children.

There is nothing we can do," said Hai, who almost nightly hears South Vietnamese artillery firing at Communist positions north of the city. "Our skins are no longer sensitive."

Some sophisticated Saigonese disbelieve the government's claims about an offensive. They think that Thieu is simply trying to distract his people from their sharpening economic plight, camouflage his army's own offensive actions and use the atmosphere of crisis to reshuffle his top command.

"It's the politics of the bicycle," said Ho Ngoc Nhuan, a Catholic opposition parliamentary deputy who represents the poor western districts of the city. "As long as you're on the bicycle, you have to pedal.

"No one believes it," said Nhuan in his tiny office, which was cluttered with anti-government tracts.

"We are going to die," said a taxi driver whose business has slumped disastrously. First the government raised the price of gas by 47 per cent; then the

Communists blew up half of the nation's civilian stocks in a depot south of Saigon.

Long lines form at gas stations daily; a black market has already sprung up and rationing is imminent.

At the end of the day, after paying for gas and the rental of his ancient Renault, the driver said he was lucky to have 500 piasters, or about 90 cents, to take home to his wife and six children. It is not enough to buy rice for everyone and the family has to get along on rice soup, he said.

At the cramped Saigon market, the stalls are still full of gaily colored cloth, jewelry, plastics and dried fish; but the customers are not buying. Merchants report a drop in sales of 50 to 75 per cent in the last three months.

Four old market women were playing the Chinese card game Tu Sac while waiting for customers who did not come. "The big men can take it easy," said one woman. "Only the citizens are dying without rice.

Even millionaires are finding it tough. "The recession is in full swing," observed Nguyen Ngoc Linh, president of the Mekong group of companies and one of South Vietnam's most successful businessmen.

If the rate of inflation keeps up — about 40 percent a year — if the price of rice keeps climbing, if foreign investors continue to shy away, Linh said, "Then everything will fall apart."