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Viet Reply Is Termed 'Negative'

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The United States has received what informed sources described as a sternly worded reply from North Vietnam to the Ford administration's overture for exploratory talks on normalizing relations.

Hanoi's response is characterized as "very hard-line or "negative" in many respects without "closing the door" to diplomatic discussions.

Another source said the reply "does not establish pre-conditions" that prevent talks, but shows discussions "will not be easy."

The response to a U.S. offer made on March 26 was delivered Monday in Paris from the Vietnamese embassy to the American embassy, a State Department official said yesterday.

U.S. officials said the Hanoi message "is being studied right now" and they declined to discuss it in any specifics.

Administration sources indicated the diplomatic message was somewhat less caustic in tone than an editorial highly critical of the U.S. overture which was published Monday in the official North Vietnamese newspaper, Nhan Dan. But the official message reportedly also used language portraying Vietnam as the deeply aggrieved party.

The Hanoi newspaper charged that American offers "to normalize relations" are "a ruse, a merchandise offered by the Ford-Kissinger administration to the home market in this election year."

It said that "for all its alluring words, the Ford administration does not yet want to normalize relations with Vietnam." If that is the real American goal, Nhan Dan said, the United States "must prove this by deeds."

Instead, the editorial said, the United States is "trying to buy voters with its 'good-will' and putting the blame on Vietnam."

The Hanoi newspaper said that: "Since the complete liberation of South Vietnam [the Communist conquest in April, 1975], the DRV government [North Vietnam] has many times declared that it is ready to talk with the U.S. government to reach an early settlement of the remaining postwar affairs concerning Vietnam and the United States as provided by the Paris agreement . . ."

Nhan Dan went on to specify that this includes "the U.S. contribution to the healing of the wounds of war in Vietnam, the search for missing Americans, the exhumation and repatriation of the remains of American dead in the war, etc."

And on this basis," Nhan Dan said, "Vietnam will normalize its relations with the United States in the spirit of article 22 of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam."

The Ford administration has renounced any obligation to supply North Vietnam with postwar reconstruction aid under the January, 1973, Vietnam cease-fire accord. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger has said the U.S. pledge was linked to the rest of the agreement which Hanoi "grossly violated" by the conquest of South Vietnam a year ago.

One source said that despite the language used by Nhan Dan, the official Hanoi message to the United States referred to the Paris pledge for postwar aid without language stating that as a precondition for discussions. Legislation is pending in Congress to lift for six months the U.S. embargo on trade with Vietnam.

It would be reimposed unless President Ford certifies that Vietnam made a substantial attempt to account for Americans missing in action and returned a substantial number of remains of missing men.

The Ford administration had opposed the legislation, seeking to retain trade as a bargaining tool with Hanoi.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) yesterday called on the administration to adopt a policy "which seeks to heal the wounds of war." Mansfield told the Senate the administration's attitude, a year after "the shooting war is over," is "a petulant reaction" with elements of an "ostrich complex."