

Vietnam talks stalled as U.S. hedges

Nixon, Thieu block settlement

anon.

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PARIS—As the secret Vietnam peace negotiations between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho remain deadlocked here after two weeks of talks, it is becoming clearer each day that the responsibility for the current impasse rests largely with the U.S. government.

Weeks ago, the North Vietnamese announced the existence of a nine-point plan to end the military conflict in Vietnam. The plan included an immediate cease-fire, complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces in return for release of all American prisoners of war, and eventually national elections, among other points.

On October 26, Kissinger (President Nixon's top foreign policy advisor) announced substantial agreement with this plan, and predicted that "peace is at hand" in Vietnam.

But now, six weeks later, no peace agreement has been signed, and all parties admit that the head-to-head talks between Kissinger and Tho are stalled in disagreement.

The official U.S. explanation of this deadlock is that while American officials are prepared to accept the nine-point draft, South Vietnam's President Thieu has refused to sign it.

WITHDRAWAL KEY ISSUE

The key provision which Thieu has balked at is the proposal for an "in-place cease-fire"—that is, all armies would be allowed to continue to occupy all territory held at the time the cease-fire becomes effective.

This would permit North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front troops to retain control over the areas of South Vietnam they captured during their offensive this spring—as much as one third of the country, according to some estimates.

This provision is supposedly acceptable to the Americans, but not to Thieu, who adamantly insists on a complete withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam.

The good intentions of the U.S. government, runs the official line, have been proven by the recent trips of both Kissinger and his chief assistant, Gen. Alexander Hagan, to Saigon to supposedly convince Thieu to drop his objections.

But this soothing portrait of American innocence in the current deadlock does not square with the basic realities of power in both Paris and Indochina.

While it is unquestionably true that Thieu is unhappy with the terms of the settlement, it is inconceivable that Thieu could maintain his position for long in the face of strong American pressure to settle.

Indeed, the entire existence of Thieu's dictatorship is dependent upon the massive amounts of economic and military aid provided by the U.S.

In particular, Thieu's army (the much-vaunted but unreliable ARVN) is being held together only by massive doses of American fire-power, and other forms of aid.

Moreover, the shaky South Vietnamese economy would collapse overnight if American aid were withdrawn.

U.S. EXPLANATION UNREAL

Thus, the American argument that they would be happy to sign the peace agreement if only Thieu would consent simply does not ring true.

Indeed, the very demand for complete North Vietnamese withdrawal is illegitimate in nature.

This arrogant demand ignores the fact that there are large numbers of Southerners fighting with the North Vietnamese, in National Liberation Front units. How one goes about demanding that these partisans withdraw from a country that is their own homeland, is an interesting question.

The withdrawal demand, in effect, asks North Vietnamese and NLF forces to quietly surrender territory won over the course of a 20-year struggle. No army in the world has ever been asked to surrender territory after winning a battle.

Finally, the initial American agreement to this point represented a concession, in return for which North Vietnamese negotiators agreed to drop their demand for an immediate release of their prisoners of war—some 30,000 of whom sit in South Vietnamese jails and prison camps today.

It is therefore becoming clearer and clearer that when Kissinger made his optimistic “peace is at hand” statement, he had failed to win not only the support of Thieu for the draft agreement, but that of President Nixon as well.

The North Vietnamese have announced their willingness to sign the proposed agreement immediately. The current deadlock in Paris is the result of American duplicity, in first agreeing to a tentative settlement, and then holding out for a higher price.

As always, the responsibility for the continuing slaughter in Vietnam rests today squarely on the shoulders of the U.S. government.

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