PEACE IN VIETNAM?

The change of basic North Vietnamese communist strategy described in an earlier issue of CNA, together with the simultaneous attacks on South Vietnamese cities and towns and the massing of communist forces around the beleaguered post of Khe Sanh, made it apparent that the Vietnam war was entering a critical stage in January of this year. Events which have taken place since that time have fully corroborate this, as do the revelations of prisoners and documents taken in the course of the fighting.

Some, at least, of the happenings were quite certainly unforeseen by N. Vietnamese leaders, so that the communists in Vietnam have been forced to modify existing plans to fit the new situation even though Resolution 13 of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party Central Committee had laid down the new basic strategy and had given rise to a comprehensive body of plans embracing political as well as military matters. In this issue of CNA it is proposed to record briefly the developments which have taken place since the Tet offensive, and then to analyse Vietnamese communist reactions to them so as to arrive at the current thinking of Hanoi's leaders about the war.

AFTER TET

The Tet offensive in S. Vietnam, which was mounted at the end of January, failed to accomplish its principal objectives. S. Vietnam's government was not overthrown, there were no mutinies inside the S. Vietnamese army or police force, and support from S. Vietnam's civil population was not forthcoming. The extravagant reports of victories and successes put out during the opening days of the offensive by Hanoi Radio, Vietnam News Agency, Liberation Radio, and N. Vietnam's press proved to be without foundation, though they had undoubtedly produced important psychological effects upon the people of N. Vietnam. With the passage of time, many of the communist claims were first moderated and then dropped in their entirety.

Nobody, not even N. Vietnam's communist leadership, can gauge the thinking of the mass of the ordinary people in the North, but it appears likely in retrospect that many of these concluded they had been misled, that 'victory followed by peace' was not imminent as the press and radio had suggested, and that the war would continue with its ever-increasing demands for manpower and sacrifices. At any rate, a prominent N. Vietnamese, whose identity cannot be disclosed for obvious reasons, smuggled out a letter in which he wrote of opposition to the rigid war policy, of sabotage, criticism, and even attacks upon convoys of war supplies destined for the South.
Counter-revolutionaries

His disclosures were confirmed almost immediately, and by no less a person than President HO CHI MINH himself. On March 21 a Presidential Decree was published in N. Vietnam which laid down very severe penalties, including life imprisonment and death, for what it described as “counter-revolutionary activity”.

The remarkable decree was directed against crimes of “opposing the fatherland, opposing the people's democratic power... undermining national defence, and undermining the struggle against U.S. aggression”. That it was felt necessary by the leaders of this totalitarian state, where the Communist Party machine has for years dominated and controlled every sphere of activity, to publicise the decree through press and radio is in itself an eloquent admission of the breakdown of central Party control. Its publication can only be regarded as a threat or warning to those elements of the population which the elaborate police and security organizations are no longer capable of controlling. But the content of the decree's list of 15 crimes are more revealing still of the state of affairs in N. Vietnam, a state of affairs very different from the Utopia described by the tame communist and fellow-travelling journalists admitted to the country for brief spells. The following are but some of the things listed as currently taking place in N. Vietnam:

- Treason against the fatherland.
- Plotting to overthrow the people's democratic power.
- Espionage.
- Armed rebellion to oppose or undermine the people's democratic power and the people's armed forces.
- Defecting to the enemy or fleeing to foreign countries. (It should be remembered that the 1946 DRV constitution guaranteed the freedom of any subject to travel inside Vietnam or abroad.)
- Murdering, beating, injuring, or kidnapping other people, or threatening to kill them for counter-revolutionary purposes.
- Sabotage of all kinds.
- Undermining the solidarity of the Vietnamese people.
- Opposing or sabotaging the carrying out of state policies and laws.
- Disrupting public order and security.
- Spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda.
- Attacking gaols, kidnapping prisoners, organising escapes from gaols, or evading imprisonment.
- Harbouring counter-revolutionary elements.

Such, then, was the internal situation of N. Vietnam in March of this year, with the Communist Party struggling by threat, bluster, and vindictive punishments, to maintain its control over an apparently rebellious people. But what of the situation in S. Vietnam?

Khe Sanh

The post of Khe Sanh had become the target of a massive siege operation.

During the third week of March the besieging forces commenced a rapid withdrawal which many foreign observers found difficult to understand since they believed the American garrison to be doomed. Subsequently a U.S. force broke the siege and occupied the terrain surrounding Khe Sanh almost unopposed. It was only then that the world learned why General Vo NGUYEN GIAP had ordered his soldiers to retreat. The evidence uncovered by the American relief force showed that some 20,000 N. Vietnamese soldiers had been killed during the operation and more than 300 artillery pieces had been destroyed, most of the damage resulting from bombardment by the U.S. Air Force.

PEACE TALKS

On March 31 President Johnson made his now famous declaration in which he ordered the total cessation of American bombing over an area of N. Vietnam inhabited by over one-tenths of the population, and permitted only the most southerly part of the country to be attacked, since that was the area through which supplies and reinforcements were pouring into the South. There is evidence to suggest that President Johnson's initiative took Hanoi's leaders completely by surprise. and, indeed, anticipated by only a very short
The composition of N. Vietnam's delegation to the bilateral talks in Paris is both interesting and revealing. Its leader, NGUYEN XUAN THUY, is a member of the Lao Dong Party's Central Committee but not of the Political Bureau, which means that he has no authority to take decisions but must simply carry out the orders he receives from the Party Secretariat. The greater part of his long Party career was spent as a journalist and newspaper editor which, in the service of N. Vietnamese communism, is synonymous with propagandist. As such, he attended frequent international gatherings of the Communist World Peace Council and visited numbers of foreign countries. In May 1963 he was appointed Foreign Minister in succession to the abruptly dismissed Ung Van Khiem, but his conduct of foreign affairs came in for much criticism from his Party colleagues and he resigned early 'for health reasons'. His second-in-command is the redoubtable Col. HA VAN LAU, scion of one of Vietnam's foremost bourgeois families and cousin of HA VINH PHUONG, a senior S. Vietnamese diplomat. Lau's bourgeois origins render him ineligible for membership of the Lao Dong Party and, being outside the Party, he has neither authority nor a voice in decision making. However, his polished social behaviour and easy good manners, together with his impeccable French, make him useful to the relatively unpolluted N. Vietnamese leaders. Lau's principal function in normal times is that of 'front man' in dealings with foreign visitors to N. Vietnam, among whom feature members of the International Control Commission established by the 1954 Geneva Conference, and it is an activity in which he is particularly skilled.
Using all his personal charm, he seeks to win their confidence, to impress them with N. Vietnamese achievements, and to mollify their anger or impatience when their requests or enquiries are blocked by his superiors. He is appointed, almost automatically, a member of any N. Vietnamese delegation participating in an international conference.

The remaining members of the N. Vietnamese team are men of similar backgrounds. NGUYEN THANH LE, for example, edited the newspaper CUU QUOC in the past and is currently editor of the Party daily NHAN DAN. An experienced propagandist, he has frequently travelled to other communist countries as a member of journalists' delegations and also to western countries. At the 1954 Geneva Conference he acted as public relations officer to the Vietnamese Communist delegation. LE VAN CHAN was earlier the correspondent of Cuu Quoc in London and acted as press officer with the N. Vietnamese delegation attending the Laos Conference at Geneva. NGUYEN VAN SÄO, the present correspondent of Cuu Quoc in London, was transferred to the delegation in Paris for the duration of the talks. There is little point in recording the backgrounds of the remainder, for they run along similar lines.

Poor show

Obviously a delegation of this composition was sent to Paris for one purpose only, to conduct a massive propaganda offensive against S. Vietnam and her American ally, and at first it seemed as though it would receive the fullest cooperation from pro-communist press and television. Some 300 correspondents arrived in Paris to film and report on the bilateral talks, and among them representatives of the world's largest and most prestigious newspapers and television companies. However, the N. Vietnamese proved to be no match for the task confronting them. By parroting the same tired old slogans, accusations, and clichés which every western reader and viewer has grown thoroughly bored, and by their failure to add anything new or fresh, they very quickly convinced the correspondents that their press conferences would be a waste of time. These, after all, were not the same communist or pro-communist journalists to whom the N. Vietnamese authorities had become so used in Hanoi, men who were prepared to accept almost any story offered to them without demur because the very fact of reporting from inside N. Vietnam was itself sufficient to guarantee publication for their articles. In Paris the N. Vietnamese met sceptical, hard-headed, enquiring journalists who were looking for something other than crude, unsophisticated cold-war propaganda. Within the space of a few days more than half the visiting correspondents had already left Paris in disgust. Almost all of those still remaining concentrated on reporting French student agitation and the paralyzing strike of French workers. The N. Vietnamese attempt to win a major propaganda victory collapsed in failure almost at once, and thereafter the meetings of the two delegations in Paris were reported in a few lines and on an inside page by most newspapers.

Talks on

Nevertheless, to continue the bilateral talks in Paris was, for N. Vietnam, a worthwhile policy even though no progress at all was being made; for she could expect to derive several not unimportant advantages from these. So long as talks proceeded, it was highly unlikely that the U.S. would resume the bombing of the whole of N. Vietnam, so that the talks themselves constituted a guarantee of immunity from attack for the communications axes, the ports, the factories, etc., over the greater part of the country. Again, the fact that U.S. and N. Vietnamese representatives were meeting on the other side of the world to discuss the future of Vietnam inevitably gave rise to anxieties in the minds of ordinary S. Vietnamese people, fearful lest some agreement should be reached over their heads which would jeopardize their whole future. The S. Vietnamese government, which is not a participant in the bilateral talks, must also feel apprehensive, and the presence of her observers in Paris is insufficient to allay these apprehensions. There are other advantages too, for the Vietnamese communists, but these are of lesser importance. For all of these reasons, Hanoi's representatives have found it necessary, even while denouncing the U.S. in terms of extreme abuse, to give repeated assurances that the talks will not be broken off. At the same time, communist military action in S. Vietnam goes on at a higher rate than ever before in an attempt to score victories over the enemy and so win an advantage for the negotiators in Paris.

Although N. Vietnam's leaders conceived the bilateral Paris talks as an opportunity for international propaganda, it is by no means certain that this was their only objective in accepting the invitation to talk. Possibly they viewed the propaganda operation as merely the initial phase, to be continued as long as they judged its results to be serving their
interests, and intended to follow it with a second phase of serious negotiation. That, at least, was the assessment of some members of the U.S. delegation. But if it were true, then Hanoi would unquestionably have to alter the composition of her delegation, or to send some member of the leadership more senior than Nguyen Xuan Thuy. Such a person would have to be a member of the Party Politburo, for only its members would command sufficient authority to negotiate at all freely, and the most obvious choice would be Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh. On June 3 N. Vietnam did indeed send a member of the Politburo to France in the person of Le Duc Tho, the leader responsible for the appointment and promotion of cadres within the Lao Dong Party. Tho is a man of some independence of mind who has, in the past, published severe criticisms of what was being done inside N. Vietnam. It is still not clear, however, whether he has gone to Paris to discover why N. Vietnam’s delegation has failed in its propaganda mission and to remedy the shortcomings, or whether his arrival heralds the commencement of the second phase and the opening of real negotiation.

THE NEW ALLIANCE

To complement the military offensive in S. Vietnam and the bilateral talks in Paris, N. Vietnam is pursuing yet another plan of action from which her leaders hope to derive considerable advantages. This is the political offensive inside S. Vietnam earlier spoken of by Gen. Nguyen Van Vinh. The capture of communist documents during and since the Tet offensive, as well as the interrogation of communist cadres and soldiers who either defected or were taken during the same period, has produced a wealth of information on the subject, so that N. Vietnamese intentions are today well known. Let us first examine the statements of an Intellectuals’ Proselytizing Cadre now in the custody of the S. Vietnamese government.

Precedents

The unchanging strategic goal of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, he asserts, is the establishment of communism throughout the whole of Vietnam. The current tactical goals involve peace, neutralism, and the formation of a coalition government. Neutralism is presently regarded as the most profitable doctrine to profess because inside S. Vietnam it is found to be attractive to members of the bourgeois and intellectual classes and to win numbers of them over to the struggle against the Saigon government. Internationally it wins the support of neutralist countries for the communist side in the war. But Hanoi’s leaders have become convinced, after repeated failure to secure the acceptance of the National Liberation Front (NLF) as an indigenous independent S. Vietnamese movement, that the Front is too deeply compromised to fulfil the role of an ostensibly non-communist alternative to the S. Vietnamese government. Inevitably all ‘front’ movements formed by the Vietnamese communists eventually come to be recognised for what they are. Whenever that happened in the past—it was the case with the Viet Minh, the Lien Viet, and the ‘To Quoc’ fronts—the communist leaders simply formed a new front movement with pretensions to still broader representation than its predecessor. Consequently, when Hanoi concluded that the NLF was everywhere regarded as its own creature, it commenced to lay plans for a successor front. As early as 1966 N. Vietnam’s leadership ordered the formation of anti-government front movements in S. Vietnamese cities, but the undertaking proved impossible to accomplish and it was decided that such fronts could be established only in cities or towns held by the Viet Cong.

Preparation

Foreigners unfamiliar with the Vietnamese communists rarely appreciate the extent of the detailed preparatory work they customarily devote to the accomplishment of an objective once the decision to achieve that objective has been taken. In the case of the new front movement, planners set to work in Hanoi to devise the ideal organization for their immediate purpose early in 1967, while Intellectuals’ Proselytizing Cadres in S. Vietnam drew up a comprehensive list of prominent persons antagonistic towards the Saigon government for any reason whatsoever. All of these people were then investigated.
in depth, studies being made of their past writings or utterances, their behaviour in times of political crisis, their attitude towards communism, and so on. This close examination revealed that many of the government's opponents were impossible to exploit and the list was whittled down to a smaller number of men deemed suitable for holding office in the new front. These were then approached secretly by specialist cadres and questioned about their reactions to the formation of the front and their willingness to serve as members. Finally, when all their replies had been scrutinized, selected candidates were contacted and instructed what to do in order to bring the new front into existence.

By January 31, the date of the Tet offensive, all was ready for execution, but the failure of the communist attackers to attain and hold their objectives undid much of the careful pre-planning. Moreover, the S. Vietnamese government had obviously uncovered some traces of the communists' intentions because it placed a number of prominent persons under protective custody as soon as hostilities commenced, thereby preventing some of the persons selected by the communists from carrying out their instructions. To lend an impression of spontaneity and to allay suspicion of previous planning, the communist leadership decreed that the various anti-government groups declaring themselves in the wake of the Tet offensive should use different titles in each locality. References were made to the Alliance of National and Peace Forces, to the Saigon Uprising Committee, to the People's Forces Struggling for Peace and Sovereignty for Vietnam, to the Committee of Action for the Salvation of Fatherland and Religion and for Independence, Peace, and Neutralism (this one was alleged to be a Cao Dai organization at Tay-ninh), to Quang-t'ri People's Revolutionary Committee, and so on. Within one month of the Tet offensive 17 different organizations had been positively identified and the Viet Cong had claimed that hundreds of others had come into being.

Despite the initial debacle, when carefully laid plans failed to materialize, the Vietnamese communists were not prepared to abandon their scheme. During March and April leaflets were distributed calling on S. Vietnamese citizens to support the revolution. One leaflet, for example, called on people to "overthrow the Saigon government and establish an independent, peaceful, and neutral South Vietnam," and another told them to "join the movement following the proclamation and declaration of the second front in Saigon and Hue. Organize a second front in Can-tho, following the activities of the second front throughout the whole country." There were few, if any, signs of these alleged second fronts in the places mentioned except in communist broadcasts and leaflets, and still less of any country-wide movement, but nobody could fail to detect the direction in which the propaganda was pointing. "All of these local organizations, even if they exist only on paper," forecast a captured Proselytizing Cadre, "will be said to have coalesced into a national alliance or front movement which will then claim to have been formed spontaneously by the will of the S. Vietnamese and to represent the overwhelming majority of the people." That is precisely what took place.

The Alliance

Late in April Hanoi Radio and Liberation radio stations commenced broadcasting reports that the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces of Vietnam had held a conference in the Saigon/Gia Dinh area on April 21 and 22. The meeting was attended by "many notabilities, intellectuals, scholars, teachers, students, writers, influential businessmen, civil servants, employees of private enterprise, and officers of all sections representing different political and religious organizations in S. Vietnam's cities and towns." A Central Committee was elected and an action programme was adopted. Details of the programme were revealed a few days later, and this included:

i. The ending of the war; the withdrawal from Vietnam of U.S. troops and bases; the inclusion of the National Liberation Front, "a patriotic force", in the peace settlement.

ii. The establishment of S. Vietnam as an independent, free, peaceful, neutral, and prosperous country enjoying freedom of the press, of speech, of movement, and of worship, and pursuing a non-aligned policy.

iii. Negotiations to be carried out between North and South Vietnam regarding reunification, which "cannot be settled at a moment's notice;" establishment of peaceful relations between North and South; freedom for S. Vietnamese to return to the South and N. Vietnamese to the North if they should wish to do so." Essentially the programme is that of the National Liberation Front, but shorn of its anti-American abuse and references to the class struggle.

Shortly after this Hanoi Radio broadcast what it termed the Communiqué of the Founding Conference issued by the All-South Vietnam Conference of the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces. The new front movement was thus officially in being and the only outstanding question remaining to be clarified was its relationship to the NLF. This was quickly settled by the broadcast from Hanoi Radio of an NLF statement declaring full support for the Alliance. The NLF declared its "profound joy" at the formation of the new front whose programme called for the "overthrow of the
puppet regime", the "creation of a government of national union", and "joint action with the NLF".

The composition of the Alliance's Central Committee should surprise nobody at all familiar with Vietnamese politics, since the names of the office holders were almost predictable. Most of them enjoy some local standing, though none is a figure of national stature, and all have a past history of participation in Communist-inspired left wing activities, especially agitation for an ending of the war on Vietnam's terms. The Chairman, TRINH DINH THAO, is a lawyer who earlier shared a legal practice with NLF Chairman NCL'YEN and a native of N. Vietnam. Because both of these facts constitute shortcomings liable to undermine his credibility as leader of an ostensibly indigenous S. Vietnamese non-communist movement, he is clearly not the ideal choice for the post. Thao's appointment by Hanoi, therefore, indicates a dearth of qualified candidates and a failure of the communists to find a prominent S. Vietnamese free from embarrassing past connections. However, the extensive communist press and radio propaganda devoted to the Alliance since its formation in late April leaves no room for doubt that Hanoi intends to exploit this new front extensively in the coming months. Before passing on from the subject of the Alliance, it is perhaps worth mentioning one additional feature common to all the named members of the Central Committee. Curiously, all of them have had past connections with France. This may or may not be significant.

Tuong Chinh

Divisions in the Hanoi leadership at the highest level have become more evident. TRUONG CHINH has taken issue with the whole policy of negotiation in a speech delivered at the Trun Hung Dau engineering plant. The communists, he stated, "must go on fighting until the ambition of the enemy to commit aggression is smashed", and promptly went on to reveal the state of affairs within the Vietnamese Party:

"The problem is to strengthen internal Party unity... It is integrative to encourage a correct attitude towards main problems in our idea and the feeling of difficulties of the sentiments are not, apparently, welcomed by his Party colleagues because this major speech by the third ranking member of the Politburo went entirely unreported by the N. Vietnamese press and radio. Only China, the bitter opponent of negotiations, reproduced the text."

The opponents of such views are unquestionably dictating policy at the present time, for talks are going on in Paris, the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces has been formed in the South for the sole purpose of creating a negotiating body more acceptable to the U.S. than the already rejected NLF, and the official news media speak approvingly of negotiation. It does seem probable that pressures for a negotiated peace will be maintained and that the newly created Alliance will receive more and more attention in order to try to make it a credible negotiating body. But this policy is under fire from leaders as powerful as Truong Chinh, who obviously commands the full backing of China, and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap. Intra-Party splits have now achieved such seriousness and notoriety that they are mentioned in speeches to ordinary workers. The fragile unity of Hanoi is under very severe strain, and if it shatters then N. Vietnamese policy could be changed overnight.

June 8, 1968

P. J. Honey

---

1 CNA, No. 701
2 The full text of the decree was published in a VNA bulletin on March 21, 1968.
3 Ibid.
4 Lt.-col. Phan Mau made these statements at a press conference in Saigon on May 31, 1968.
5 Text reproduced from the notebook of a senior Viet Cong cadre who recorded Gen. Vinh's remarks at length. It was captured in the course of operations Cedar Falls and Junction City in the spring of 1967.
6 See CNA, No. 595 for a description of Lao Dong Party working methods.
8 Recorded message intended for broadcast found in possession of a Viet Cong cadre captured in Binh Dinh province on the eve of the Tet offensive.
9 Hanoi Radio, February 13, 1968
10 Hanoi Radio, February 21, 1968
11 Found in Chuong-thien province in March 1968.
12 Found in Ba-xuyen province in April 1968.
13 Liberation Radio, April 22, 1968
14 Liberation Radio, April 25, 1968
15 Hanoi Radio, April 27, 1968
16 Hanoi Radio, April 30, 1968
17 NCNA bulletin, April 28, 1968