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VNA CARRIES REPORT BY DER SPIEGEL CORRESPONDENT IN SAIGON

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[Saigon liberated--by Tiziano Terzani, DER SPIEGEL correspondent in Saigon]

[Text] Hanoi VNA May 7--Saigon has been named Ho Chi Minh City. Not only the name, but the colours of the flags over every building, every door, every car; not only the uniforms of the soldiers, but the posters, the banners across the streets and the songs on the radio have changed. The mood of this city, the faces of the people are new.

On May 2 in front of the presidential palace I heard a middle-aged businessman saying to a liberation forces major: "I was, we were all, very afraid of you because of what the Americans had taught us. Now I realise that we belong to the same house, we are from the same fathers and mothers, and we have only been separated for a while."

At six o'clock on the same day Gen "Big" Minh, last president of the republic, Vu Van Mau, prime minister, and all other cabinet members were set free by the liberation forces. A former Saigon army colonel who had not been able to escape commented to me: "I would never have believed that they would be so generous with us." After 2 days in hiding with friends he was now in the streets with liberation soldiers. They are all very young, all wear Ho Chi Minh sandals, no insignia to distinguish officers from rank and file.

Tanks covered with red dust, lorries and antiaircraft batteries camouflaged with leafy branches are massed among the trees in the square in front of the Catholic cathedral.

For May Day there was no official parade, but a spontaneous popular demonstration of joy, relief. The whole city population was in the streets. Saigon has not been conquered, but liberated. After the kisses and the embraces of the first hours, now people gather around liberation soldiers asking questions, smiling. Most soldiers are young, very young. Liberation units continue to arrive in the city center. Some have Saigon maps for orientation.

There have been no reports or even rumours of executions.

Saigon soldiers have turned in weapons at special centers controlled by the newly emerged students revolutionary committees. At Vu Han university I saw two big halls full of guns and ammunition. Students delivered civilian clothes and new identity papers to Saigon soldiers. No arrests. The foreign community is free to circulate in the streets. On May 2 stores open again. Bread is available.

Many South Vietnamese are still in Grall hospital for fear of reprisal. Some leave now. Refugees leave Saigon towards [the] countryside. [The] PRG Government [is] expected to be installed here soon. Delay due to surprising conditions of surrender and quick control of city. PRG flags all over town, cars, bicycles and lambrettas. Students with guns and red armbands keep order with liberation soldiers.

I saw Tuyet Anh, a young prostitute whom the American GI's had nicknamed Linda, talking to a woman guerrilla.

A week ago she was terrified and wanted to leave Vietnam. Now she is with her 3-year old daughter, smiling: "They say I can go back to my village," she shouted at me. She had changed her clothes. She looked like a peasant again.

Like a sandcastle washed away by the incoming tide, the old regime has been swallowed up by the sea of guerrillas, political cadres, regular soldiers of the liberation forces, ordinary people who are swarming over the city. Saigon has been liberated not conquered or occupied.

The streets are littered with the left overs of the recent past: Uniforms, helmets, pictures, documents, weapons and boots--army boots everywhere.

Listening to the order of surrender, ARVN (puppet) soldiers stripped themselves on the spot. Many in groups of five or six went barefoot wearing only underpants, waving at the first communist tanks moving down Tu Do Street on liberation day...like a puppet with no more strings, the whole Saigon apparatus collapsed in a matter of hours...

At 12:45 on April 30, I was running behind a truckload of PRG soldiers going to take up position at the town hall. From the back of the courtyard we were sprayed with machine gun fire. It lasted a few minutes. The guerrillas fought their way in. I saw an ARVN soldier against a wall drop his gun and plead for his life before young guerrillas. He was allowed to go. As everywhere else in the city, there was no bloodbath. The other resisters were arrested. At the ministry of national defence on Gia Long Street an ARVN colonel stood next to the flag pole with a pistol in his right hand when a truck stopped in front of the gate. He tried to kill himself but the guerrilla grabbed him in time.

I saw his pistol waving in the air, his arm held by the liberation soldiers, while the red and yellow flag of the Thieu republic was lowered....

In the most populous areas of Saigon the arrival of the liberation forces was highly emotional. On Li Van Duet Street on the way to the Chi Ho prison, I was in the middle of an almost hysterical crowd tearing down the flags of the old regime, jumping on the tanks and running alongside lorries full of young soldiers. I saw from the tank I was riding on an old woman wearing a straw hat almost strangling a guerrilla in her arms. She was crying and shouting "Hoa Binh, Hoa Binh" (peace, peace).

Chi Hoa prison itself was open around midday. An NFL tank stopped in front of the gates already crowded with prisoners and an officer made a short speech: "The people wish to thank all those who have made sacrifices and have suffered." All the more than 7,000 prisoners were set free.

During the day all other prisons in the region around Saigon were opened.

Doan Khac Xuyen, 24, a Catholic student political prisoner for 3 years, left the prison of Go Cong, south of Saigon on the afternoon of April 30. He told me: "There was something strange in the air. We did not know what. We saw our wardens packing their belongings. Then they all changed their clothes and left. We broke open the doors."

Groups of just released political prisoners, still in their black jail pajamas, came to see the presidential palace on May 2. Dao Xuan Dieu, 44 from Tuy Hoa, had spent 12 years in prison, 5 of them in the tiger cages at Con Son. I met him in front of the palace while he was telling a group of onlookers about his experiences. He said: "I was arrested because I was working for the revolution. I have not heard of my family for all this time. I will go back to my village and look for them now. I am happy."

In Gia Dinh, from houses over door were still to be seen the slogan imposed by the former government: "This family will never live under the communists." People were running out in the streets singing the revolutionary song "Saigon Rises Up" which they could have only learned from Radio Hanoi or Radio Liberation, during years of clandestine listening.

The first communist troops entered Saigon less than 4 hours after the last U.S. helicopter had taken off from the roof of the American Embassy with its load of the last Marine guards. The helicopter had been halted on the roof by gunfire.

The helicopter took off at 7:45 in the morning in a white and red cloud of tear gas fired by the last Marines to keep the Vietnamese crowd at bay.

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The large boulevard in front of the embassy whose steel gates had been smashed by the combined strength of thousands of people were littered with the remains of the plunder: books, papers, broken filing cabinets and ripped off curtains. The embassy was then partly burned.

The looting of American installations had started a day earlier (29 April) when the coded order of the American evacuation became public (the U.S. radio station in Saigon repeated the message: "Mother wants you to call home, mother wants you to call home") and the pathetic, embarrassed stream of Americans with small bags going to given gathering points, started to appear in the deserted streets (curfew was then 24 hours).

CBS reporter Peter Collins had time for a last word in front of the Hotel Continental: "With the departure of the last Americans the Vietnam war is over," he said.

The war was not yet over, Tan Son Nhut airport had been attacked early at dawn and big battles were still going on in the outskirts of the city. From the roof garden of the Hotel Caravelle we could see a huge circle of smoke all around Saigon and the fire of explosions behind the two bell towers of the cathedral in the direction of the airport. We could see the tracers of communists anti-aircraft guns in the sky firing at landing and departing planes. Three were shot down.

While American journalists, businessmen, contractors were leaving the main downtown hotels, some of them were called back by the cashiers because in panic they had not paid their hotel bills. American private houses, offices, and the special "for Americans only" discount stores were invaded by South Vietnamese...

Groups of students with guns were everywhere along with liberation soldiers. Though petrol had become scarce and increasingly expensive on the black market, masses of Hondas, cars, busses, along with tanks, troops transports and jeeps were jamming the streets.

The airport had become the quietest place in town. The control tower was intact, the runways littered with debris of sharpnel and with hundreds of rocket shells.

At 1251 we heard the noise of an incoming aircraft. Hundreds of soldiers ran on to the tarmac (and we were with them) to see a gigantic Russian-made helicopter (Mi6), green with a big red star, touching down near the passenger terminal. It was the first Hanoi-Saigon connection.

It was a moment of great emotion. The group of some 40 airmen, journalists and political cadres from North Vietnam were received with applause, hugs, and kisses by the soldiers stationed at Tan Son Nhut. Many people cried with joy. One of the passengers told us: "When I left Saigon 30 years ago, I knew I would come back one day".