

VIETNAM

Does the South Vietnam National Liberation Front feel time running out for it? Whatever South Vietnamese feel about President Thieu a majority of them don't want to live under a communist banner

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Paris

So Easy Without Thieu

DESPITE the cold reception America's David Bruce gave to the South Vietnam National Liberation Front's latest eight-point proposal for a settlement of the Vietnam conflict put forward by its representative Mrs Nguyen Thi Binh, there's far more hope in the atmosphere at Paris than a year ago.

Behind the scenes are meetings galore between Vietnamese — communist, non-communist and neutralist — and much of the tension has gone out of the air. Messages are being sent — directly or indirectly — through the large community of Vietnamese exiles in Paris or through mutual French friends. And there is a marked willingness on all sides to listen to another's opinion. The NLF has been as active as any other grouping: it has floated messages which it has known would somehow reach the ears of people in Saigon, especially those with no love for President Nguyen Van Thieu but with no desire to live under the banner of communism. NLF was particularly intense in the days before Mrs Binh presented her eight-point plan to the eighty-fourth Paris meeting on September 17.

Although Mrs Binh regarded Bruce's response to her plan as "negative" it clearly was not final. The door has not been slammed. It was generally regarded here that Bruce was unwilling to make a move before discussing the proposal with President Richard Nixon at Limerick last Sunday.

In the meanwhile, Nixon adviser Henry Kissinger was rushing to Paris to confer with Bruce. It seemed certain that the US was unwilling to make a hard and fast decision before letting a possible chance for peace slip by. What the Americans wanted to know were the details which lay behind Mrs Binh's proposal.

The first official American reaction to the proposal was that it was "propagandistic". Bruce called it "old wine in new bottle". Of course, there was a propaganda element in them: how could any communist forsake the agit-prop les-



Mrs Nguyen Thi Binh: Eight-point proposal rejected but the door is not closed by any means.

sons before acceptance into the party's fold? The American congressional elections are only a few weeks away, and it would be silly for a communist leader to miss a golden opportunity to provide Nixon's opponents with fresh ammunition.

But there is more than propaganda in Mrs Binh's proposal. The South Vietnamese presidential and legislative elections (for renewal of the lower house) are only a year away, and it would be a good thing to have the Americans out, or at least to have neutralised them, some time before then. The demand date for US withdrawal — June 30, 1971 — is only two months before those elections are due to take place. This means that the NLF is thinking, possibly seriously, about those elections and especially about arch-enemy Thieu. If the war is not settled by then, they will have to contend with him for another four years. There is little doubt that the Americans will not entertain any thought of turning Thieu out if the war continues. They have



The Thieu-Ky-Khiem troika: No progress until it goes.

made this clear to the French government as well as to many other Vietnamese in Paris and this attitude is surely known to the NLF.

Of the various demands made by the NLF in the 16 months since the four-sided talks started, two have been pursued steadfastly: American troops must be withdrawn; the Thieu-Ky-Khiem troika must go. However, on the first point, the NLF seems prepared to be flexible: the extent, speed and timing of the withdrawals are negotiable. But on the second, the NLF has remained adamant. It has insisted all along that the Thieu-Ky-Khiem administration must go before any substantive talks can start. This has been considered an unacceptable "precondition" by the American side.

The Americans have their own precondition — that there should be no preconditions. But here, the American position is more flexible than it appears: the departure of Thieu and his associates will not be accepted prior to the substantive talks, but nothing has been said about America's refusal to discuss that possibility as part of the substantive talks. After all, Washington is firmly committed to the maintenance of the Thieu government until 1971 — and as long as fighting continues — but it has left open the question of what happens when Thieu's term expires or when fighting stops. Another situation unacceptable to Washington would be the communisation of South Vietnam or its control by a predominantly communist government. It has not invested over 50,000 lives and over US\$100,000 million for that purpose. And the NLF and North Vietnam have not won the war by a long chalk. In fact the situation in South Vietnam today is, if anything, to the contrary.

This last fact throws a great deal of light on the motivation behind Mrs Binh's proposal. The NLF has come to realise that for it too, the war is unwinnable. Since their Tet offensive of 1968, the military tide has slowly but steadily turned against the communist forces. The extension of fighting to Cambodia has added to their difficulties: the loss of the Cambodian sanctuaries of Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh airport has deprived them of their best supply bases. North Vietnam, too, has its own problems, in particular the deterioration of morale of the population due to economic difficulties and repeated — and unkept — promises of victory being just round the corner.

In the South, many non-communists may dislike President Thieu and American bullying, but they are not prepared to trade these evils for communist rule. The maximum they would accept is a minority role, the smaller the better, for the NLF, especially for the communist elements in it. Efforts to lure non-communists into active co-operation with the NLF have failed, even in France where there is no risk of punishment by the Thieu government. That, too, is a hard reality, and if the NLF is to get a good settlement before the tide turns against them too strongly, they must do it before it is too late. This being the case, between an impossible victory and an unacceptable Thieu, there must come the inevitable: a compromise on the duration of the Thieu regime.

Perhaps they hope to persuade the Americans to stop backing Thieu at the election next year. In return, the NLF might accept a minority role in the politics of South Vietnam and not the previously demanded coalition government. But it would be hard to deny the NLF a role in the committee entrusted with preparing fair elections.

The big problem is how to persuade Thieu to bow out gracefully. He has been preparing actively for a second term in the past two years. And he will surely run again — unless



"Big" Minh: In team with Thieu he would be unbeatable.

stopped by Washington. Without American support, his chances of winning are not good. And he may spoil the chances of another non-communist candidate more popular than him: Duong Van "Big" Minh. If Thieu can be persuaded to step down in 1971 and make room for Minh — and make that decision now — the way will be cleared for substantive talks, and faces will be saved all round. And with Minh in the running any communist candidate for the presidency would be faced with an uphill task.

Moreover, if Thieu can be persuaded to join forces with Minh, in return for an honourable position in his government, such a coalition would be unbeatable. Its chances would be enhanced if Washington resisted the temptation either to stand in its way or openly declare its support for it. Even more damaging would be if Washington demanded that the coalition be "pro-American".

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