



The President's Daily Brief

April 24, 1975

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

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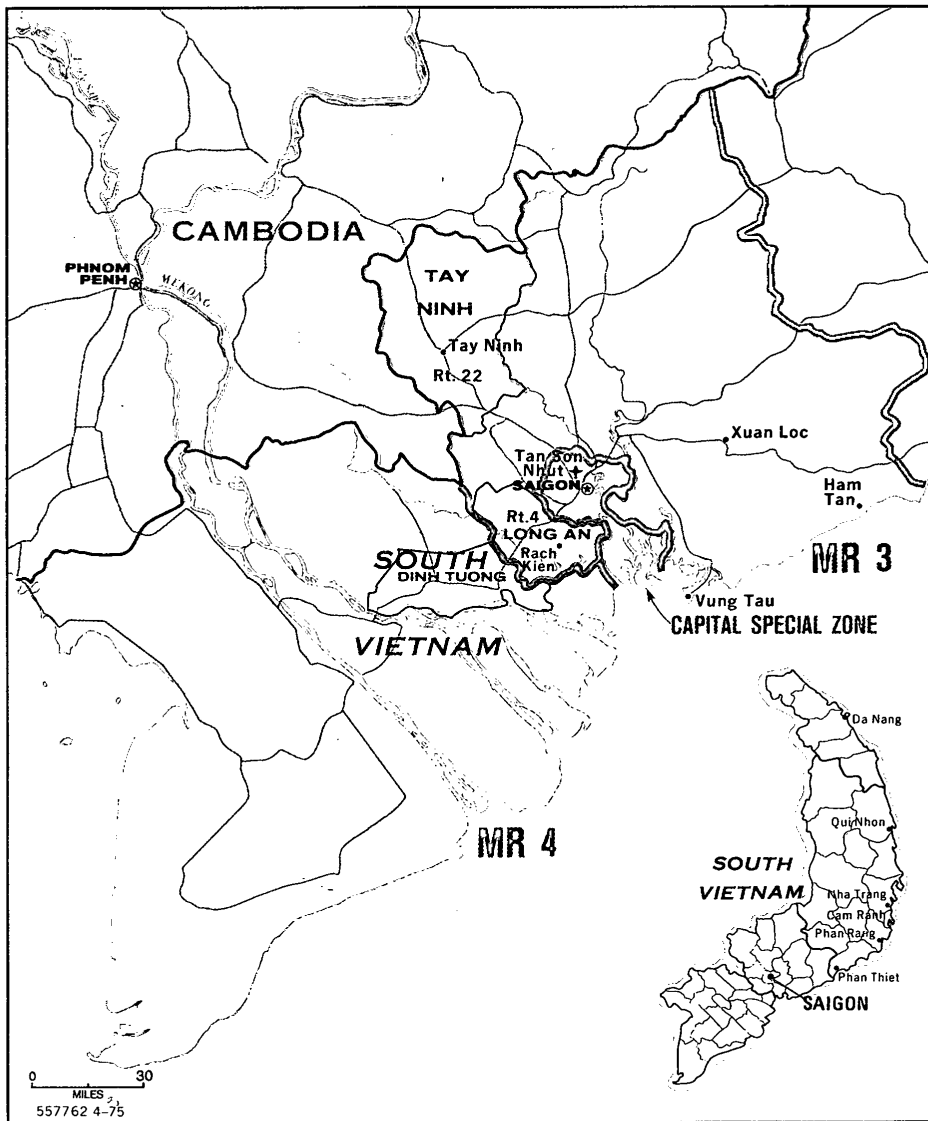
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SOUTH VIETNAM

The communist attack toward Saigon has slowed. Communist units are reportedly still having difficulty moving supplies forward, and there could be some additional delay before some units are ready to resume the attack. Most evidence, however, points to direct assaults on Saigon's outer defenses this week or by the end of April at the latest.

It is difficult for battalions to coordinate their arrival at assembly and attack positions, and a lull of several days before an attack by a number of divisions is not unusual. The communists must also have in mind that a pause, following Thieu's resignation, allows Saigon leaders time to move toward a surrender.

North Vietnamese counterattacks against government positions in Tay Ninh Province again closed the road to the provincial capital. The South Vietnamese were also forced from the Rach Kien District town in Long An Province just ten miles southwest of Saigon. A regiment of the North Vietnamese 8th Division--one of the two that led the communist sweep on the east side of Route 4--has been ordered to mount an attack against Saigon, according to recently captured prisoners.

On the central coast, the North Vietnamese are moving supplies and equipment by sea into ports as far south as Nha Trang. Aerial photography of April 21 shows a number of small coastal vessels and barges unloading there. Similar activity had previously been noted at Qui Nhon and Da Nang, and the North Vietnamese will probably soon begin using their newly acquired port facilities farther south, including those at Cam Ranh Bay and Phan Thiet.

Hanoi Radio announced yesterday that Lt. General Nguyen Vinh Nghi and Brig. General Pham Ngoc Sang have been captured. General Nghi was the commander of the Military Region 3 Forward Command, and General Sang led the South Vietnamese air force 6th Division--both headquartered at Phan Rang.

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These officers and their staffs were unable to fly out of Phan Rang when it fell to the communists last week because rebellious Rangers seized and took off in the only available escape aircraft.

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South Vietnam's new President, Tran Van Huong, still appears to be trying to open some sort of political dialogue. He met twice yesterday with the French ambassador to Saigon and recalled his chief negotiator in Paris, Ambassador Phong, for "urgent" discussions.

Huong appears hopeful that the Viet Cong will accept some offer of political dialogue short of surrender discussions. The French government, which has been in contact with communist representatives in Paris, apparently still believes such talks can be arranged. Ambassador Phong, whose opinion probably has been influenced by the French, shares that view.

Most political opposition leaders believe that the communists will not negotiate with the remnants of the Thieu regime and that the first order of business is to organize a government that might meet communist specifications. There is, however, considerable disunity within the opposition. Four principal leaders--Catholic Father Thanh, General "Big" Minh, former senate chairman Huyen, and Buddhist activist Vu Van Mau--met yesterday to prepare a joint statement demanding that President Huong step aside and allow a new cabinet to take charge, but the four were unable to agree on the procedures under which a new cabinet would operate.

Moreover, we are not certain that the military would support any arrangement on which the political opposition could agree. Despite the precarious situation in South Vietnam, the support of the military--or at least its agreement not to interfere--is still needed before a new government can be formed.

President Huong accepted the resignation of the Can cabinet yesterday. Huong says he hopes to have a new government formed by Friday.

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EGYPT-SYRIA

Presidents Sadat and Asad may have papered over some differences during their two-day summit in Saudi Arabia's capital, but the lack of specifics in the communiqué issued yesterday suggests continuing serious disagreements.

The communiqué affirmed that "political action during the coming stage demands the establishment of the closest cooperation between Syria and Egypt." It noted that "any action"--presumably meaning any negotiated agreement--on a particular front should be "part of" similar action on all fronts. These assertions are obviously designed to mollify President Asad, who has consistently demanded that Sadat refrain from making his own agreements with Israel and instead pursue an overall settlement that satisfies all Arab territorial demands.

The communiqué pointedly did not mention the Geneva conference, however, and made scant mention of the Palestinians. These omissions suggest that the two presidents found little common ground on the issues that are most basic to any formulation of a joint strategy. The communiqué referred only in passing to ensuring the "legitimate rights" of the Palestinians, but avoided standard Arab formulations on establishing a Palestinian state and guaranteeing the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization at Geneva.

Sadat has been attempting to devise a formula that would defer the issue of PLO participation in the conference and, even when this is agreed upon, obscure the PLO presence by absorbing it in a broader Arab delegation. He has apparently had no success in pressing this position on the Palestinians and may have run into difficulty with Asad as well. The Syrians have hinted broadly in the past that they might boycott the conference unless the PLO is invited to attend from the start.

Following Asad's departure from Riyadh yesterday, Sadat began a brief round of bilateral consultations with King Khalid and the new Saudi leadership; he then flew to Tehran for a meeting with the Shah. He is scheduled to return to Cairo today.

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SYRIA-US

President Asad reportedly affirmed his intention to pursue improved relations with the US during the unpublicized sessions of the recent Syrian Baath Party congress. Asad sought to relieve the apprehensions of individual party members by offering assurances that his approach was advantageous to Syria and posed no threat to Syrian interests.

Syrian Army Chief of Staff Shihabi told Ambassador Murphy, in recounting the proceedings, that he had never before heard Asad address the issue of US-Syrian relations so categorically and that Asad's views dominated the discussion. At past party congresses, delegates had vied with one another in attacking the US.

Asad reportedly attempted also to inject a note of realism into the party's discussion of the extent of Syrian backing for the Palestinians. He said there is "no prospect of Israel changing its character as a Jewish state" and no possibility that Israel can be destroyed. The President repeated, however, that Israel must withdraw from all territory occupied in 1967 and that Palestinians should have the right to establish a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza.

Shihabi could well have exaggerated Asad's position in hopes of favorably impressing the US during the current Middle East policy review. It would also be prudent for Damascus to preserve good relations with the US at a time when Syria's relations with Egypt are uncertain and when Asad has grown increasingly realistic about the limited chances for dramatic gains at a resumed session of the Geneva talks.

Asad's remarks on Israel are consistent with his private acknowledgment last February that he was ready to sign a long-term peace treaty, provided that the Israelis withdrew to the pre-June 1967 borders and accepted a Palestinian state. References by Asad to "historical realities" and to the indestructibility of Israel accord with other indications that Damascus is reluctant to take on Israel militarily and that Asad believes that negotiations--however difficult--provide the best chance for regaining occupied territory.

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NOTES

There is no conflict between detente and Soviet support for Portugal's "progressive" political course, according to articles in Pravda and Izvestia this week.

The Soviets cast themselves in the articles as the true supporters of democracy in Portugal and blame the West for meddling in Portuguese affairs. The Pravda commentary is particularly critical of social democratic leaders in West Europe, whom it accuses of undermining the Communists in order to advance the cause of the Portuguese socialists. The Soviet line is probably intended for domestic consumption, but it also puts the West on notice that detente considerations will not keep Moscow from assisting, and benefiting from, Lisbon's leftward movement.

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The Palestine Liberation Organization is seeking permanent observer status at the Paris-based UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization as a means of further expanding its international representation and acceptability.

UNESCO has formerly permitted only non-member states--such as the Holy See--and intergovernmental organizations to appoint permanent observer delegates; no national liberation movement has ever applied for such standing. The PLO and their front men in Paris, the Tunisian delegates, may be encountering more opposition than they had expected. Black Africans are concerned that introduction of this issue, coming so soon after the controversy aroused by the actions taken against Israel last November, could further damage the organization, which, for the first time, is headed by an African.

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