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Vietnam Peace Teams Get Along Fairly Well, Can't Get Organized

In Phan Thiet, Little Discord
Surfaces—but Few Decisions;
A Problem: 'Mother' Has BO

By BARRY KRAMER
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PHAN THIET, Vietnam—While South Vietnamese planes repeatedly dropped incendiary bombs on Vietcong positions in the valley below, members of the international peace-keeping force had a grandstand view of the action from their hilltop headquarters a few miles away.

"It was a helluva good show," a Canadian military officer says. Along with Hungarian, Indonesian and Polish members of the International Commission of Control and Supervision stationed here, he gawked through binoculars at the battle, which took place several days ago. "Of course," one Indonesian winks, "although we saw the Vietnamese planes doing the bombing, there's been no official complaint. So, officially, we saw nothing."

That, in a nutshell, is where the control commission stands today, unable to function in the field while the Joint Military Commission, consisting of the four belligerents, debates procedural matters. The military commission must set up its 26 local teams in the countryside before the control group can do likewise and start investigating and reporting on cease-fire violations. They are already many days behind schedule.

"We're ready to go," says Col. Frank Campbell, who heads the Canadian team here and who is temporary chairman of the control commission's regional team at Phan Thiet. "But the big holdup is the military commission," he adds. "They appear to be working together well, but progress has been very slow."

Trading Charges

Around the country, the situation is similar. While the control commission and the military commission were supposed to have staffed their local stations in the Vietnamese countryside, only the seven regional centers are so far operating. And the war continues, with both the South Vietnamese government and the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government having traded charges of thousands of cease-fire violations.

By all indications at Phan Thiet, a coastal town 125 miles northeast of Saigon that is the two peace-keeping groups' regional headquarters for four Central Highlands provinces, the delegates of the four nations in the control commission are getting along swimmingly. On the military-commission side, while the United States seems to be working well with the three Vietnamese members—North Vietnam, the Vietcong and South Vietnam—relations are a little cooler between the Saigon representatives and the other Vietnamese.

"The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong have been completely cooperative," says Lt. Col. Phillip A. Goetzmann of the American mil-

itary-commission delegation here. He terms "very cordial" the atmosphere of negotiations, which so far have been only among subordinates; the chiefs of the military-group delegations hadn't met at midweek, several days after the delegations arrived.

"It's amazing that they've done such a complete flip-flop in attitude," the American officer says of the Vietnamese Communists.

The cordiality isn't one-sided. The Americans have gone out of their way to provide transportation and supplies until the private contractors hired to support the two peace-keeping commissions can get rolling. The Americans even provided the wood frame and glass needed by the North Vietnamese to frame a large portrait of Ho Chi Minh.

A Quarter Decides the Quarters

Both groups are working at a former U.S. airport on a dusty hilltop near Phan Thiet. The hilltop, littered with garbage, is ringed with several rows of barbed-wire fence and is guarded by local Vietnamese "field police" armed with M16 rifles and wearing camouflage uniforms, flak jackets and steel helmets. The area, with its dilapidated buildings, looks more like Stalag 17 than a peace-keeping center. The military commission meets in a low, one-room wooden building, with a small steeple on top, that once served the American forces here as a chapel. All religious signs have been removed, and the building's stark interior holds only a wooden table covered with an orange cloth—orange is the color of the military-commission flag—and a dozen or so folding chairs. The building has no windows, only screened breezeways under the eaves.

Another building has been divided into four equal sections to serve as conference rooms for each of the military-commission delegations. "The Vietcong and the South Vietnamese flipped a coin to see who would get which of the four rooms," an American delegate reports. The coin was a U.S. quarter, "so we had to explain what was heads and what was tails." After the toss, the quarter was given to the Vietcong interpreter. The South Vietnamese then picked the rooms for the Americans and the Vietcong for the North Vietnamese.

The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong served tea to visitors, the North Vietnamese in the room that they have decorated with the picture of Ho Chi Minh, flags and flowers.

None of the Communist delegates have chosen to leave the airport enclosure, but if they do, they will be escorted by South Vietnamese soldiers. "It's mostly for their own protection," says the local province chief, Col. Ngo Tan Nghia. He says Vietnamese crowds in Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot, most of them anti-Communist Catholics who had left North Vietnam in 1954, demonstrated when the North Vietnamese and Vietcong delegates landed at those two cities. At Ban Me Thuot, in fact, the shouting crowds broke through a soccer-field gate and pelted North Vietnamese, Vietcong, American and South Vietnamese military officers alike with bottles and stones. Some of the officers were slightly injured, the most serious being an American colonel who was hit in the head with a stone.

Only the Communist delegates to the military commission live at the airport. Three old masonry buildings that look as if they date from French colonial days house the 60-odd North Vietnamese and about 40 Vietcong. A small, one-

built outside one building, and officers from both delegations can be seen wandering around the buildings. Both sides wear the same uniforms, all of which seem brand-new and ill-fitting, but the Vietcong are rankless while the North Vietnamese wear red shoulder boards denoting their individual ranks.

A young American Army pilot who just flew some control-commission officials to the airport looks with bewilderment at the North Vietnamese and Vietcong area a few yards away. "I used to fly planes out of here to bomb those dudes," he says. "And now look—they're living right on the runway!"

No Mingling With Newsmen

Foreign newsmen who manage to get into the meeting area aren't allowed by the South Vietnamese to talk with the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong. In fact, a friendly South Vietnamese lieutenant who answered the questions of American newsmen about activities in the compound was later scolded loudly by the South Vietnamese colonel in charge. The colonel told him for all to hear: "In Saigon, we don't even let the newsmen into the compound where the military commission meets."

Most information about the peace-keeping operations comes not from the tight-lipped military-commission delegations but from the less secretive control-commission members, especially the Canadians; as a matter of policy, the Canadians have been very open with the press. The Indonesians are likewise friendly. While the Poles and the Hungarians welcomed reporters, they talked about little else than the weather.

Phan Thiet isn't exactly one of South Vietnam's finer cities. It is small and crowded, with few "Western" amenities. The two best hotels have been taken over by the Canadian, Polish and Hungarian delegations, who total about 30 officers. All eat at the nearby headquarters of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, not only because there is a bar there but also because the water is potable and it has the only Western kitchen in town, with real dishwashers.

Pacific Architects & Engineers, a U.S. construction concern that has the contract to feed the control-commission delegations, isn't fully set up yet, but there are plans for it to take over the headquarters compound when the U.S. Army leaves next month.

Air America will be flying the control-commission delegations around, but because of that air service's CIA connections, a different name will be used, members of the control group report.

The Way the Wind Blows

Phan Thiet, among its other negative attributes, is a center for the production of nuoc mam, the tasty but malodorous Vietnamese seasoning sauce made by decomposing salted fish in large vats. The city has numerous nuoc-mam factories, many of them close to the hotels housing the peace-keepers. "There's one right outside my window," Col. Campbell of the Canadians reports. "Fortunately, however, the wind is usually blowing the other way."

One of the hotels is on the banks of the Song Cai, or Mother River. Mother apparently has BO. "You wouldn't believe it at low tide," a Canadian major says of the slimy gray river.

The Canadians, here more than a week, appear to be going somewhat stir crazy. "There's

really nothing to do in town," one says as he sits bare-chested in his hotel room sipping canned Canadian ale. "The Vietnamese in the street are very friendly, but they all stare at you and make you feel like an animal in the zoo." Another major says, "I haven't seen a newspaper or heard a radio in two weeks."

Col. Nghia, the province chief, has made an effort to be friendly with the control commission. Shortly after the commission members arrived, he held a banquet for them at his headquarters, complete with Vietnamese delicacies and entertainment.

The colonel offers the commission delegates free use of his seaside villa and tells them he would like to take them hunting for tiger, elephant and deer. Would they be showing favoritism if they accepted? "Not at all," a Canadian replies. "If the Vietcong offer us a villa, we'll accept that, too." The Hungarians and the Poles also seem enthusiastic about the offer of the beach house, which is again an indication of the dreariness of Phan Thiet.

A Period of Adjustment

"Actually," Col. Campbell says charitably, "these aren't such bad accommodations for a town this size. It just takes a little adjusting to." But after only a week here, the officers talk longingly about visiting the mountain resort of Da Lat in the Central Highlands or Nha Trang farther up the coast—both cities of considerable charm.

The control-commission delegates here have agreed that every decision they make must be unanimous, and while they report there has been little disagreement so far, most decisions have been administrative. For example, they decided that if they were in the field investigating an alleged cease-fire violation and they came under fire, all four delegations would have to agree to depart before anyone left. "We decided that if we were exposed to fire, the joint decision would come pretty rapidly," one Canadian says with a smile.

Sessions have been slowed somewhat by the need for translations into English, the control commission's working language. The Poles have brought their own translator, but the English of the Hungarians is said to be limited. And while the Canadians say the Indonesians understand everything, the chief of the Indonesian delegation, Navy Col. R. Dihadjo, says it was "a mistake" not to bring an interpreter. Col. Dihadjo, who converses freely in English, says he finds that "conference English is very different from talking (conversational) English." But as long as technical terms are explained, he adds, "I don't think there will be any problems."

There aren't any signs, members of the control-commission delegations report, that any of the members will take sides in investigating cease-fire disputes, as did the old International Control Commission, set up to regulate the Geneva settlement of the first Vietnamese war. But neither are there signs yet that the new control commission will be any more effective than the old commission, on which both the Canadians and the Poles served.

The Canadians have already made it clear, however, that they will refuse to serve on the commission past the initial 60-day period, during which U.S. troops withdraw from Vietnam, if it appears that the new commission is being hamstrung. Accordingly, there appears little chance that the cease-fire, and the peace that could follow, will work unless all sides want it to work.

While the control commission and the Joint Military Commission kill time at Phan Thiet, Vietnamese continue to kill and maim each other in military Region 4, the area to be supervised from Phan Thiet. Col. Nghia, the province chief, reports that shortly after the cease-fire went into effect, the commander of the Vietcong in the area broke into the South Vietnamese Army's radio frequency and demanded to speak with him.

"Land Belongs to the People"

"He told me that I had better keep my soldiers in the cities and the outposts and that everything else was his," the peppery colonel relates. "So I told him that the land belongs to the people and that if you don't stay in your sanctuaries in the mountains, I'll kill any of your troops that come into our areas."

Since the cease-fire, then, there has been a series of actions in which each side attempts to assert its control over hamlets and stretches of road. The government appears to have the upper hand, but the Vietcong still call the first shots. The main roads, at least, are usually clear to traffic, except near Pleiku and Kontum, where the fighting has been more severe.

Vietnamese and American officials voice the common speculation that the Vietcong will make major attempts to grab land in the hours before the teams of the two peace-keeping commissions finally set up their local outposts. The speculation, however, seems to be based more on Vietcong actions prior to the cease-fire than on hard evidence of current intent.

This is reasonable speculation, nevertheless, because no matter which side controls a village or portion of a highway when the control commission arrives, it would be difficult to prove that this side hadn't always controlled it. That is why the government has ordered its flags flown from almost every bit of real estate possible. The Vietcong's flags are up in some villages as well, and there have been reports that the Vietcong are constructing large bamboo archways, decorated with their flags and flowers, to "welcome" the control commission to areas over which they claim control.