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U. S. Says Coup Timing by Viets Was a Surprise

BY PHILIP DODD

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Washington, Jan. 27 — The Johnson administration was not totally surprised by the latest government upheaval—the ninth in 15 months—in Viet Nam, officials said today.

The principal element of surprise appeared to be the timing of the military coup which put Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh back in control of the government. American Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor was in Laos when it happened.

An American official said the political chaos which has existed in Saigon and other Vietnamese cities for the last week was an indication that some kind of action could be expected.

Rusk Delays Comment

Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other top government officials would make no comment for the record on the Vietnamese situation until "we have all the facts."

There could be little doubt, however, that official Washington was dismayed by the latest turn of events. The administration has held all along that a stable civilian government is needed in Saigon for the prosecution of the war against communist guerrillas.

At the same time, a wait-and-see attitude was evident. Leaders of the latest coup have indicated that they intend to operate as far as possible within the framework of civilian government and to make plans for the popular election of a national assembly.

Capitol Pessimistic

But on Capitol hill, where appropriations for the Vietnamese war are voted, reaction to the

news from Saigon was pessimistic.

Sen. George D. Aiken (R., Vt.), second-ranking G. O. P. member of the Senate foreign relations committee, said he had about reached the conclusion that Taylor had reached the end of his usefulness.

Taylor is a retired general who was chairman of the joint chiefs of staff last summer when President Johnson named him ambassador to Saigon, succeeding Henry Cabot Lodge, a Republican.

'Closer to People'

"I'm not sure a successor would do any better than Ambassador Taylor," Aiken said. "I don't blame Ambassador Taylor. He's a top-flight military officer, but we need some down to earth type who could get closer to the people."

One of Taylor's difficulties in the Saigon post has been an apparent inability to get along with Khanh, chief of the Vietnamese military forces who also has served variously as chief of state and premier since Taylor went to Saigon.

Chairman J. William Fulbright (D., Ark.) of the foreign relations committee said the news from Saigon was very distressing but that he did not think another coup was imminent.

Mike Mansfield (D., Mont.), Senate majority leader, said he thought Taylor was doing the best possible job under the circumstances.

Coups Complicate Job

"But these coups," Mansfield said, "make his already difficult job more difficult and delicate."

Estimates gathered thru the questioning of prisoners taken in South Vietnamese operations indicated that 10,000 North Vietnamese filtered into South Viet Nam last year, a 50 per cent increase over 1963.

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