

zczc sag

yy nnn

clifford 1 (normass/deepe)

SAIGON, JULY 17--Against the jet-boom backdrop of combat-bound, fighter-bombers, American Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford began setting the stage for the week-end Honolulu Conference between Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Nguyen Van Thieu.

And, in turn, the Honolulu session began shp shaping up as a momentarily pivotal Allied strax meeting, wi weighing the great issue of war or peace in Vietnam.

The stagemanship of the khaki-clad Defense Chief consisted of:

1. Revealing that the North Vietnamese had withdrawn "some" of its divisions out of South Vietnam across the demilitarized zone. He did not specify the number. This statement was a distinct "row-back" from his official assessment made in Washington last weekend before beginning the his Vietnam visit that the Communists were escalating their strength in the five northern provinces to eight divisions "and possibly more." In recent weeks, the U. S. Marine command here has ~~carried~~ listed on their intel Rolls five North Vietnamese divisions ~~in the vi~~ Now say at least ~~in the vi~~ five northern provinces; sources here said that one of these--the 320th, once around Khe Sanh--had moved back across the DMZ line.

--more reuter

zczc sag

yy mmm

clifford 2 (normass/deepe)

In Saigon, informed sources calculate that Hanoi has withdrawn between one-quarter and one-third of its 80,000 North Vietnamese ~~100~~ main-force troop strength from the South Vietnamese countryside.

In Honolulu, the pivotal decision would seem to be whether this North Vietnamese de-escalation meets the American demands in Paris to a great enough extent for President Johnson to stop bombing North Vietnam. ~~In rec-~~

2. The Secretary declined to discuss the possibility of stopping the bombing of North Vietnam, saying it was involved in the Paris peace talks and he did not wish to prejudice the negotiations.

Obviously, however, the question of stopping or continuing the bombing of the North is also connected with Mr. Clifford's assessment of the ground war just south of the DMZ.

"The level of fighting in I corps and the northern provinces (bordering the ~~10~~ DMZ) has lowered," he said. The military analysis of senior American Army and Marine commanders who briefed him today was "this is merely the lull before the storm," he said.

--more reuter

zczc sag

yy nmm

clifford 3 (normass/deepe)

Or as one informed American officer described the northern zone: "We ~~can~~
can't find the war and the we can't find the enemy. We're down to platoon
and squad sized contacts now--even around Khe Sanh."

3. The Secretary reiterated he would not predict when any American troops
might possibly begin withdrawing from South Vietnam. He ~~previs~~ ^{HAS} previously
cited three "unknowns" on which this question rested: the developme
developments in the Paris peace talks, the long-term level of Communist military
activity and the progress of the South Vietnamese armed forces in improving in
fighting effectiveness/ so that they ~~could~~ ^{we are to} replace American troops.

Mr. Clifford's refusal to ~~manusky~~ make any "timetable" predictions
seemed to indicate a ~~set~~ stiffening of the American position ~~just before~~
~~Honolulu~~ ^{before} over President Thieu's statement five days ~~earlier~~ ^{earlier}—when
the three "unknowns" also existed--that American troops might begin withdrawing
in 1969 and General William C. Westmoreland's estimate a few weeks earlier
that they might begin ~~in~~ late this year.

--more reuter

zczc sag

yy nmm

clifford 4 (normass/deepe)

Report NO

The tall Defense chief also repeated that no more American troops would be sent to North Vietnam-- above the present level of 537,000--and that none of the senior field commanders here had indicated to him they intended to request more.

Mr. Clifford highly praised the First Vietnamese Army Division, which has fought hard and continuously along the DMZ and which he ~~was told in a briefing~~ said he was told in a briefing was equal in fighting effectiveness to one American Army division. He subtly suggested however that this was an exceptional division, not typical of the none other regular Vietnamese divisions. He also refused to predict when these divisions might be effective enough to permit the beginning of an American withdrawal.

In fact, when asked if his field trip in the northern provinces had encouraged him to believe more and more fighting could be turned over to the Vietnamese, he replied: "This has been the outstanding fact of my morning briefings."

He subtly suggested however that this was an exceptional division, not ~~the~~ typical of the nine other regular Vietnamese divisions. He also refused to predict when these divisions might be effective enough to permit the beginning of an American withdrawal.

--more reuter

zczc sag

yy nmm

clifford 5 (normass/deepe)

5. Mr. Clifford reiterated the view that he and American field commanders anticipated the North Vietnamese units which had withdrawn from the South would return to combat "with greater force and effectiveness."

He said he expected a major attack by the end of July, in August or early September. Although "some continuing contacts with opposing forces" might occur at any time. He said he proceeded on the assumption that Communist military plans are coupled with their desire to make an impression on the Paris peace conference. If they achieved some "spectacular accomplishment," this could affect the negotiations in Paris. But, he said the Allied commanders were prepared to meet the offensive to prevent that happening.

He said he was unwilling to predict specifically whether the Communists would attack Saigon, but he said there was an "increase in their forces around Saigon and continuing movement of men into III Corps," the eleven provinces surrounding Saigon. He said he believed the Communists would mount some type of assault on Saigon but the degree or extent was unknown.

His net conclusion at the big-picture level was summed up: "I don't know what lies ahead. We will watch the intelligence information with care." The former head of a Presidential intelligence board, he referred to the future plans and potential surprises from the Communist camp. And, he neatly left dangling any reference to crucial decisions to be made in the Allied side during the week-end at Waikiki.

—end reuter