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THE NATION

FOREIGN RELATIONS

"Outrages like This"

For at least three weeks Saigon had been rife with rumors that a Communist suicide squad was going to try to blow up the U.S. embassy in reprisal for air attacks on North Viet Nam. Last week the Communists made the rumors come true.

It happened on a clear, hot morning. More than 150 embassy staff people were at work inside the five-story building. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor was in Washington for talks with President Johnson; left in charge was Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson. Outside the embassy, a sentry unit of six Saigon policemen ambled conversationally along the sidewalk.

At 10:46 a.m., a man on a Lambretta motor scooter buzzed past the cops, parked across the street from the embassy. Moments later, a Renault Frégate sedan drove up, pulled up to the curb about four yards from the building. The driver got out, complained about having motor trouble. When a cop told him to move on because he was blocking traffic, he opened fire with a pistol. The Lambretta rider also began blasting away. The Saigon cops shot back; the car-driving terrorist was riddled, and the scooter rider fled for his life. One policeman fell, wounded in the stomach. Hearing the gunfire, embassy workers hurried to peer out the windows. They got there just in time to see a plume of white smoke curling from a rear window of the car. Then 250 lbs. of dynamite, crammed inside the car, exploded.

Glistening with Blood. Every window in the embassy burst inward. Jagged glass bits blasted like a blizzard of razor blades through every office. The ground floor was turned into a knee-deep mass of rubble. Parked cars spun into the air and landed in twisted heaps. A crowded Chinese restaurant across the street collapsed in smoke and flames, its floor strewn with still bodies and flopping forms of the wounded. Dozens of pedestrians in a nearby shopping district were flattened by the blast. Where the car had been, there was only a smoking pit, two feet deep. Three charred bodies lay near by, and bits of pulverized flesh littered the street.

For a moment there was silence. Then the first path

from the wreckage. They became screams. Sirens began to wail in the distance. At last, people started to stumble from the embassy, blood streaming from their faces and arms, their hair glistening with blood and tiny shards of glass.

Deputy Ambassador Johnson had been in his fifth-floor office. Immediately after the blast, he appeared at the shattered entryway, calmly directing first-aid operations and bringing the first order out of chaos. His face was cut and blood dripped on his shirt. A Navy enlisted man lay on a stretcher while a medic held his hand over a gaping wound in the sailor's throat. A man rushed down the street cradling the corpse of a little boy in his arms. Many of the wounded who could walk left bloody footprints on the pavement.

Two Americans were dead. Embassy Stenographer Barbara Robbins, 21, who had come to Saigon from Denver six months before, died at her desk, a ballpoint pen still clutched in her hand. Navy Storekeeper 2/C Manolito W. Castillo, 26, a clerk at the embassy, was killed in the doorway of the building when the bomb exploded. Three Saigon policemen were blown to bits. In all, 22 persons, most of them innocent Vietnamese pedestrians, were killed, and 190 were hurt. The motor-scooter driver had raced out of the blast area, was shot twice and arrested by pursuing police. He claimed he was a hired helper, that he had been paid \$139 by the Viet Cong to offer getaway transportation for the bomber.

Same Program. When the news got to Washington, it was evening. President Johnson was in the midst of making a champagne toast at a White House dinner when an aide handed him a small brown envelope. While a segment of his toast was being translated into French for foreign guests, the President read the message. His face tightened, and he stumbled slightly over his words as he continued the toast. Even as he talked, Johnson handed the note to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, seated near him. Rusk read it and quickly left the room. Later the President, in quiet fury, circulated word of the bombing among his guests.

Next day the President issued a blistering statement: "Outrages like this

will only reinforce the determination of the American people and Govern-



VIETNAMESE VICTIM OUTSIDE EMBASSY



DEPUTY AMBASSADOR JOHNSON



WOUNDED U.S. SECRETARY & RESCUER

Blizzard of glass, seconds of organized silence.

Continued

ment to continue and to strengthen their assistance and support for the people and government of Viet Nam." Johnson, Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Foreign Policy Adviser McGeorge Bundy decided not to launch any massive attack against North Viet Nam in specific retaliation for the bombing. After a long session with the President, Ambassador Taylor said: "We are simply going to stay on our program of doing what we did before. We've just got to do what we have been doing more effectively."

Through the week, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces continued to do what they had been doing—hitting North Viet Nam and the Viet Cong with bombs and ground fire (see THE WORLD). To make the U.S. commitment more effective, the President agreed with Taylor's request to send more men, money and equipment into the war. Several thousand more U.S. troops would be dispatched to beef up the 27,500-man contingent there now, and another 160,000 men would be added to the existing South Vietnamese military force of over half a million. Should the Red Chinese choose to intervene with ground forces, some 350,000 U.S. troops could be thrown into the war, according to a longstanding Administration contingency plan.

Twittering Doves. Meanwhile, U.S. air strikes were intensified—and extended farther to the north. There was a considerable twittering among the doves, and complaints that the bombings had so far produced no tangible results. Before he returned to Saigon at week's end, Taylor replied to them: "I think that it is premature, too early to see any great visible sign. What I do see is a very notable increase in morale and confidence." The President, too, remained adamant, told a press conference: "I think that we are following a course of action that is

calculated to best represent the interests of this nation, and beyond that I see no good that would flow from prophecies or predictions."

The U.S. course of action may have brought at least one result: there were new indications all last week that the Hanoi regime might be softening toward the idea of negotiating a cease-fire and, eventually, a full settlement that might not require a complete pull-out of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia. But the negotiating table remained a long way off. Viet Nam was still a bloody, violent battlefield, and U.S. forces were committed to an ugly war. Last week alone, seven Americans died in combat. And Saigon was rife with new rumors to the effect that Viet Cong suicide teams were taking aim on their next target: the six-story, glass-walled United States Information Service building.

SOUTH VIET NAM

Taking the Initiative

The U.S. bomb line was moving slowly closer to North Viet Nam's capital of Hanoi. Sweeping in from their carriers in the South China Sea, U.S. Navy fighter-bombers struck twice at a vital bridge link on the coastal highway just 65 miles south of the capital. The bombs and rockets that smashed the span marked the first time U.S. air power had hit a purely strategic target in North Viet Nam.

As the Navy planes knifed through the cloud cover high over the shattered bridge, they were challenged by a trio of Communist MIGs, in their first appearance since the air strikes over North Viet Nam began two months ago. The Red fighters made one ineffectual pass at the Navy planes, then disappeared into the haze.

That encounter may have indicated that Hanoi's Red rulers are worried that their hard-won light-industrial complex—located between Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong—might be the U.S.'s next target. Other U.S. strikes last week hit at half a dozen air-defense radar stations throughout North Viet Nam, blinding the electronic eyes that might later be used to direct Communist interceptors against attacking American forces. Within South Viet Nam itself, U.S. jets and prop-driven fighter-bombers flying from ships and shore continued their pounding of the Communist Viet Cong.

Attacks by Night. The noise of airplane engines and the violence of the Viet Cong's sneak attack on the U.S. embassy in Saigon (see THE NATION) were in sharp contrast to a curious silence on the ground in South Viet Nam. For nearly a month the Viet Cong "main force" has been lying low, refusing to tangle with the South Vietnamese army. Communist-provoked incidents have dropped from a peak of 1,020 a week during December (long before U.S. air strikes began) to 400 a week last month. In the critical Mekong Delta, South Viet Nam's prized and hotly-contested "rice bowl," night attacks by the Viet Cong slumped to the lowest level in years.

What was happening? Were the Viet Cong finally being hurt by the air strikes? Or were they merely regrouping for harder and deadlier actions in the weeks to come? No one could say, but the Viet Cong follow Mao Tse-tung's combat-tested guerrilla formula: retreat in the face of superior force, choose your own time and place for battle, and cultivate patience as if it were rice.

Bloody Scuffle. From Danang to the Mekong Delta patience was growing thin last week on both sides. Taking



SOUTH VIETNAMESE MARINE CAUGHT IN DELTA AMBUSH
In the rice bowl, patience is a crop—and the crop is thin.

the initiative, some 3,000 South Vietnamese marines slogged through 38 slimy canals south of Saigon battling away leeches even as they caught slugs from Communist snipers. The toll was light—18 Viet Cong killed—but it was the first government offensive since December in the delta, and U.S. advisers hoped it would encourage the government troops to undertake bigger and more effective pushes not only in the delta, but throughout the country.

The Viet Cong were clearly willing to fight when they were engaged, whether in the delta or farther north. Up in Quang Tin province, near Danang, a helilift of South Vietnamese paras, hoping to provoke a big battle, made contact with the Communists in a slough of serried hills, scuffled briefly but bloodily, then withdrew to regroup. The Viet Cong did not press their advantage, so the government troops waded in again. By week's end more than 300 Reds had been killed. Government losses were 34 dead—plus two U.S. Marine Corps advisers killed by ground fire.

Operation Backfire. Almost simultaneously, South Vietnamese and U.S. forces launched another key offensive in the Boiloi Forest, 48 square miles of Communist stronghold 25 miles northeast of Saigon. Leaflets were dropped on the cave-infested region, warning all noncombatants to get out fast. More than 2,000 did. Then planes saturated the woods with chemical defoliants. After a few weeks of sunny, wind-scoured weather, the Boiloi Forest was tinder-dry. Last week U.S. bombers swept in with loads of Incendijel (an incendiary compound derived from na-

palm), while behind them flew C-123s dropping drums of fuel oil.

The forest went up in flames—precisely as U.S. planners had figured. Then came the sort of absurd disaster for which the Viet Nam war has become famous. The intense heat of the Boiloi boil caused the wet, tropical air overhead to condense into giant thunderclouds. The "thermal convective condition," as U.S. Air Force meteorologists later defined it, triggered a drenching downpour that doused the forest fire and left Boiloi's Viet Cong safe and unsinged in their caves.

The operation may have backfired, but still, the initiative in the air and on the ground in Viet Nam last week remained on the side of the government forces.