

## Le Duan in India

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# Vietnam seeks to alleviate its economic and diplomatic isolation

by Susan Maitra from New Delhi

On Sept. 21, less than a week before the United Nations General Assembly convened in New York, Le Duan, secretary-general of the Vietnamese Communist Party, heading a delegation which included Tran Quynh, vice-chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, arrived in New Delhi for discussions with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The delegation's composition indicates that Vietnam was not only seeking bilateral discussion on economic matters, but also aid from India, the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), in solving the long-standing problem in Kampuchea. Speaking at a banquet hosted in Le Duan's honor, Prime Minister Gandhi said that Southeast Asia had been an arena of wars and upheavals for the last four decades. She pointed out that the resolutions adopted at the Non-Aligned summit last year at New Delhi could provide the basis for a durable solution to the region. "There should be total freedom from interference and intervention from outside in the internal affairs of the country. Only thus can the collective peace and prosperity for all the people in Southeast Asia be secured," she said, adding, "Vietnam has a creative role in achieving that."

The resolutions passed by the Non-Aligned Summit provided a general formulation which has since been interpreted differently by different countries. The declaration called for negotiations by the countries in the region and elimination of involvement and threats of intervention by outside powers. It also called for withdrawal of all foreign forces to ensure sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the countries in the region, including Kampuchea.

While the ASEAN bloc has referred to the NAM resolution as a viable basis for Vietnamese troop withdrawal from Kampuchea, the Vietnamese have used it to couple any such withdrawal with a simultaneous U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea and Philippines. The matter has come to a halt.

But in the last month, the Vietnamese have made several moves showing that they at least want to make the appearance of loosening the regional knot over Kampuchea. Not the least of these is Le Duan's trip to India.

All propaganda aside, the Kampuchea problem is hurting the Vietnamese. While the ASEAN bloc countries have con-

tinued to make economic gains, although at a slower rate due to the overall world depression, Vietnam has grown poorer. Living in isolation from the ASEAN trade dynamics and having been dependent on the sputtering Soviet economy, Vietnam is hurting economically more than any other nation in the region.

### The economic reality

The urgent necessity to build the Vietnamese economy was the subject of a major speech delivered by Le Duan in mid-July. Vietnamese exports are continuing to drop while capacity to buy Soviet oil, fabric for the textile industry, machinery, and most other basic necessities is decreasing. Hanoi's foreign currency reserves, according to available reports, stood at exactly zero for the last 18 months. Basic economic necessities remain beyond the grasp of virtually the entire population as never before.

The loss of life in Vietnam's 40-year fight for independence has also created a severe lack of skilled manpower in all of Indochina. Vietnamese peasants are unskilled and dependent on traditional methods of farming. Vietnam's farmlands have among the lowest per-acre yields in the world, and the country continues to depend on imported food grains. In the middle of one of the most fertile land areas in the world, such food shortages point to a pronounced lack of infrastructure and technological skills. Now, even importation of food grains is becoming difficult because of the vanished foreign-exchange reserves and the Soviets' inability to supply Vietnam with food or reserves.

Vietnam faces the the same problem in the light-industry sector. Despite their best efforts for more than a decade, 600 Swedes living in air-conditioned bungalows in Vietnamese villages could not make a U.S. \$500 million paper mill operational. A Hungarian-backed shoe factory had a similar frustrating experience. The shoes produced by Vietnamese workers were so shoddy that they could not be exported. It has also been reported that, exasperated by the lack of skill of Vietnamese supervisors, the Soviets are demanding that Soviet managers take charge of all Soviet-backed projects.

These problems were at the forefront of the discussions in India. In a meeting with the Indian delegation led by

Agricultural Minister Rao Birendra Singh, Tran Quynh listed a wide range of industries in the context of the Vietnamese plan for cooperation with India. Tran listed a number of projects in agro-based industries in which Vietnam is interested in receiving assistance from India, whether in the form of joint ventures in the state sector or as joint ventures between the private sector in India and the government in Vietnam.

Leading the list of such industries are vegetable oil production, sugar and sugarcane production, jute processing, and rubber plantations. In the manufacturing sector, Vietnam expressed the desire for Indian assistance to exploit the country's rock phosphate deposits for fertilizers and offshore petroleum exploration. It is also evident that the Vietnamese leaders would like to explore the possibility of importing surplus Indian food grains on a long-term repayment basis.

### Hopes of overtures

The economy is also likely an important consideration in the decision to send Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach to Tokyo next month. The Japanese have a longstanding proposal for solving the Kampuchean conflict, which was endorsed by the ASEAN heads of state summit in July. According to this plan, the Japanese would help mediate a settlement based on the phased withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea and the creation of an international peacekeeping force to oversee free and fair elections in the country.

Even more important, Japan has indicated that under such conditions, it would renew its bilateral aid to Vietnam, which was brought to a halt when the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea in 1979. According to Japanese officials, Japan would give the Indochinese countries consideration equal to the ASEAN countries in matters of aid allocation. This could mean that Vietnam could receive four times the amount it received five years ago.

In an interview with Kyodo news service last month, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach appeared to welcome Japanese mediation to solve the problem. However, a correction to the wire was later released by the Vietnamese, stating that Hanoi had not accepted Japanese mediation, since "Japan seems on the one hand to play a role in settling the Cambodian problem but on the other hand it supports ASEAN over Cambodia. It can only play a role by taking a neutral posture." A Vietnamese foreign-ministry official explained that Vietnam is now willing to accept international supervision and monitoring in Kampuchea once a settlement is reached.

Vietnam's gestures were encouraged by former Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanand, who reiterated ASEAN's call for unconditional talks between Vietnam and ASEAN. Upon his return from a tour of ASEAN countries last week, Kriangsak emphasized that eventual talks between Vietnam and ASEAN on Kampuchea should not be hampered by preconditions. "Imposing preconditions before a dialogue will

be damaging for us. The war in Kampuchea may go on for the next 10 to 20 years and the Khmer race will become extinct. In that case, others will be happy."

Within the week, Vietnam's Thach arrived for a three-day stay in Bangkok. But Thach had no words for the press, since, he said, negotiations are not carried out in the pages of the newspapers.

The Vietnamese have made a definite change in one area that immediately affects Thailand: China. According to a Vietnamese foreign-ministry official, Vietnam's earlier position was that Hanoi would withdraw from Kampuchea only when the "Chinese threat has ceased." But since "the Chinese threat against Indochina has existed for thousands of years, we have defined it more narrowly. First, China should stop arming Pol Pot as an instrument against the Cambodian people. The second condition is that Thailand should stop providing sanctuary to Pol Pot." The Vietnamese have also called for direct talks with China.

There is, however, no sign that Peking is ready to take up such overtures. The Chinese-equipped Khmer Rouge, by far the strongest force of the three Kampuchean rebel groupings, is escalating its guerrilla operations against the Vietnamese deep in Kampuchean territory. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who is presumed to become the head of state under a free Kampuchea, stood next to Deng Tse-Ping during the Chinese anniversary celebrations last week, and declared that "The coalition [of Sihanouk, Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge] will never split. We have set our minds on unity to the very end when victory is achieved against the Vietnamese invasion and we will continue our unity in the reconstruction of our homeland."

The Chinese, according to the Bangkok daily *The Nation*, have promised to rebuild Kampuchea after the Vietnamese troops have been forced to pull out. This is not a credible offer, given the Chinese-backed 1975-79 rule of Pol Pot, which resulted in the death of nearly half the Khmer population, and given China's own huge economic problems.

Certainly the Vietnamese are aware that the Chinese are in no hurry to reach a solution to the Kampuchean problem, and few believe that the Vietnamese have any intention of ever leaving Kampuchea. It is also the case that the Vietnamese changes in position have come just at the point that the ASEAN countries—watching the United States' steady strategic withdrawal from the region, as exemplified by the U.S. attitude toward the Philippines—are moving to make their peace with the Soviet Union. The ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting late last month ended with a call for a nuclear-free peace zone in Southeast Asia, a stance that drew accolades in Moscow.

It is within this context that Le Duan's trip to India and, at some point, to Japan takes on particular significance. No matter what games the Vietnamese may be playing under the aegis of their Soviet allies, economic reality is impelling the Vietnamese to seek help and friends.