

Vietnam looks for maneuvering room

by Linda de Hoyos

Nguyen Van Linh, general secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, departed Ho Chi Minh City July 15 for Moscow, at the invitation of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov. The Vietnamese send-off, featuring new Prime Minister Do Muoi and other senior Politburo members, leaves no doubt that, although Hanoi called the visit a "vacation," Linh was embarked on a state visit carrying messages backed by the full consensus of the Vietnamese leadership.

Discussion will undoubtedly focus on the steps being taken to bring a settlement to the nine-year Kampuchean conflict. The trip takes place only 10 days before Vietnam, along with Laos and the Phnom Penh government in Kampuchea, will attend a "cocktail party" in Jakarta, Indonesia, with the leadership of the tripartite Khmer resistance coalition and representatives of the non-communist Southeast Asian countries. The party is designed to be the first step toward an international conference—bringing in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing—to resolve the fate of Kampuchea.

However, the visit also comes amid rumors of tensions between Hanoi and Moscow which the Kampuchean developments may be bringing to the fore. First, is Vietnam's fear that the Soviet Union might be opting for a coalition government in Phnom Penh between the current government of Heng Samrin, backed by the Vietnamese, and the Khmer Rouge, backed by China. Reports to this effect began circulating in early June, when Hanoi announced that it would carry out a unilateral withdrawal of 50,000 of its troops from Kampuchea. Such a coalition government could represent a security threat to Vietnam, given that 1) the Khmer Rouge had waged war against Vietnam from Phnom Penh from 1977 until the Vietnam *blitzkrieg* in 1979; and 2) the Khmer Rouge forces are believed to be well-equipped by China and preparing to wrest full control of Kampuchea once Vietnam fully withdraws.

A second point of tension is Moscow's demand over the last year to fully control the flow and allocation of \$2 billion in Soviet aid per year to Vietnam. It is this money—not Vietnamese funds—that has largely paid for the Vietnamese side of the war in Kampuchea. The Soviets were reportedly concerned that aid was being channeled into economic projects, rather than into Moscow's own military concerns.

Soviet aid has not accomplished much since 1975 to rebuild the nation of Vietnam. For instance, Vietnamese leaders are reportedly piqued that the newly completed Tri

An Dam north of Ho Chi Minh City, designed by Soviet engineers, will never go into operation because of structural deficiencies. Vietnam is now believed to be seeking to end its oil dependency on the Soviet Union. In mid-June, Vietnam completed an agreement with the India-owned Hydrocarbons India, Ltd. for oil exploration in the Nambo Sea Shelf on Vietnam's southern coast.

Famine conditions

Today, 13 years after the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese economy is in a shambles. Despite its rich paddy land, Vietnam is currently unable to feed itself, due to lack of agricultural inputs, and drought. Western press sources now speak of Vietnam as the "Ethiopia of Asia," as relief agencies confirm famine conditions in the north.

Inflation in the country has run amok, as the bankrupt state-controlled economy is overpowered by the black market. Before Vietnam's National Assembly on June 29, Phan Van Tiem, head of the State Price Commission, reported that in some parts of Vietnam, food prices had increased 535% in the first half of 1988. "In Hanoi, the price of pork increased from 900 dong per kilogram in January 1988 to 4,000 dong at present," Tiem said, according to reports in the *Bangkok Post*. "The price of rice has increased from 150 dong per kilogram to 500-700."

It is the economic crisis that is propelling Vietnam to take initiatives to resolve the Kampuchean conflict. This is not because the deployment of Vietnamese troops to Kampuchea is such a drain on the economy—it is believed that Moscow pays for this expenditure. Having reaped no benefits in its role as a Soviet military ally, Vietnam is desperately seeking economic input from the West, to which the Kampuchean conflict is the chief diplomatic obstacle.

Particularly, Vietnam is seeking to mend its fences with the United States. Aside from the surprise withdrawal of 50,000 troops from Kampuchea, Vietnam has made several concessions to the United States in the last month. First, the Vietnamese announced that they had found the remains of 25 more MIAs which they would send back to the United States. This has been the key official stumbling block to the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Then, Hanoi reported that it would release up to 50,000 political prisoners and permit them to leave Vietnam, with the condition that they not engage in political conspiracies against the Vietnamese government. Thirdly, Vietnam reported that it had rescued three U.S. airmen, whose plane had gone down in the South China Sea near the Spratly Islands, and would soon release them to the United States.

However, there are no signs of American reciprocity. The State Department's first concern has been to achieve a Kampuchean settlement, in the interests of its global deal with Moscow, without disrupting relations with China. Beijing, in its turn, has shown no serious signs of slackening its 100% support for the Khmer Rouge.