

## 'A time to wait for next rocket'

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pg. 1

# 'A time to wait for next rocket'

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**SAIGON—IT is a time for waiting, a time to wonder where the next rocket will explode, where the next North Vietnamese victory will be, when Saigon will fall.**

There is a strange, sad giddiness in Saigon after the short, but effective rocket barrages on the city Sunday—like the feeling one gets when the score is 56 to 0 late in the fourth quarter and your team is the one with zero.

You aren't happy about the thrashing your team got, but at this point the most merciful thing is for the game to end.

**DESPITE THE talk of fighting to the death and never surrendering that one hears**

from politicians around Saigon these days, most Vietnamese have resigned themselves to the fact that the war is finally drawing to a close.

"It is not what we wanted," says a Vietnamese doctor, "but it is what we must accept. The South has lost. It is fini."

That phrase: "It is fini," is perhaps the most often heard phrase in Saigon these days. Every day journalists are asked by cabdrivers, ARVN soldiers, street hustlers, shop owners: "You stay for end? You wait for Saigon to die?"

**THE ANSWER is always yes. No need for pep talks. No need to prolong the agony of war. You have seen the superior numbers of North Vietnamese troops punch thru wavering South Vietnamese**

army lines again and again. You know South Viet Nam no longer can wage any kind of effective war against the superior fire power of the North. You know it is "fini."

The streets of Saigon still are choked with motorcycles and ancient cars belching blue smoke into the deep blue Vietnamese sky; the whores, the pickpockets; the child hustlers, the sidewalk money changers, the beggars, the disabled veterans—all are still there waiting to greet you on the solemn streets.

There has been no laughter on Saigon's streets for weeks now. Not since the fall of the Central and Northern Highlands almost a month ago; not since defeat began drifting

Continued on page 4, col. 6

# Saigon waits for final rocket to end the war

Continued from page one

over the city like a thick un-stoppable fog.

THE GOVERNMENT tried to dissipate that fog, tired to keep it from slithering down into the dingy streets by sending patriotic music and speeches thundering out over loudspeakers. But even that has stopped now.

"Why play music when the dancers have already gone home?" asks our Vietnamese interpreter.

So now there is the waiting. What will the North Vietnamese do when they take the city? What will happen to the people?

"I AM SURE I'll be slaughtered because I own my own business—I am a capitalist," says the man who rented you a car. And besides that, both my wife and I fled from the North in 1954. But we don't care what the bastards do to us—we have gotten both our sons into the States."

There are those who are not so worried. Those who plan to stay and welcome the victors. Those who are just happy the war is finally going to end.

"I will go into my house and not come out for three days unless the North Vietnamese ask me to," says a Vietnamese restaurateur named Nguyen Van Xuan. "I have only tried to feed my family by owning this restaurant and if

they think that is a crime, then they can chop off my head with my blessing. Because I would not want to live under a system that punishes a man for trying to feed his family."

OTHERS SAY secretly that they are happy the North apparently has won the war.

"I am no Viet Cong," says a Tu Do Street lawyer. "But the North Vietnamese are industrious and those in Saigon are mostly lazy crooks. They need the discipline of Hanoi."

Meanwhile, down Highway 1 comes the news that communist forces are pushing thru Bien Hoa—once the headquarters of the military commander for Saigon and other cities in what is known as Military Region III.

AND STILL there is talk in Saigon of a "political solution." A way to negotiate an end to the war.

But that talk is little more than empty rhetoric now. Why should the North negotiate a peace when they can take the city at will? Ask some observers. Perhaps to maintain at least a modicum of validity in the 1973 Paris peace agreement, answer others.

"After all, the North Vietnamese still say they have no troops in the South and if they walk into Saigon with those 22 divisions how are they going to explain that to the international community?" asks a

Western diplomat.

But the news that Route 15, the road to the coastal city of Vung Tau, 90 miles southeast of Saigon has just been cut by advancing North Vietnamese forces, puts an end to that kind of speculation. The communists are definitely tightening the noose.

Not more than 12 hours before that road was cut we had driven to Vung Tau in search of South Vietnamese Marines who were supposed to have been reoutfitted after their defeat in the Northern Highlands a month ago. We didn't find them, and we thought about spending the night there. Lucky for us, we came back to Saigon.

BUT THAT IS the way things seem to happen here. One day a village, a city, a road is peaceful—the next it is the scene of devastation. One day we can drive almost anywhere, the next day we may find ourselves cut off behind North Vietnamese lines.

And here in Saigon they are secretly getting the North Vietnamese and Provisional Revolutionary Government flags ready.

"It is rather disgusting when you think about it," says a tailor whose tiny shop is turning the flags out. "But then I once made American flags and before that, French flags and I'm still here and they are gone."

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South Vietnamese soldiers, most having shed their weapons, retreat toward Saigon Sunday along Route 15, east of the capital.