

Information from Bulgarian Ambassador in Beijing with proposal for material aid to
North Vietnam, 7 May 1955*

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Beijing, 7 May 1955

No. 320

To the Minister of foreign affairs

Dr. Mincho Neychev

Comrade Minister,

As you already know, on 1 April, accompanied by the commercial advisor Comrade Konstantinov, and the Embassy official Dimitrov, I left for Vietnam in connection with my accreditation, and returned to Beijing on 23 April.

On 6 April, upon our arrival at the last Chinese railway station, we were met by Vietnamese comrades. After crossing the Chinese-Vietnamese border, we were met by the deputy chief of Protocol at the Foreign Ministry.

We continued our trip from the Chinese railway station Pinskyan to Hanoi by car, since railroad transportation in Vietnam has not been normalized yet and there are no comfortable passenger carriages.

In the evening on the same day, we arrived in the town of Lang-Son, which had been completely demolished. We spent the night in a recently built boarding school. An official welcoming ceremony was organized with the participation of pioneers, a lot of

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citizens, led by the Chairman of the City Council, important party and social figures. They carried the national flags of our country and of Vietnam, the portraits of Comrade Ho Shi Min and Comrade Chervenkov, many flowers and slogans. They shouted slogans in favor of the Bulgarian-Vietnamese comradeship and sang revolutionary songs.

On the next day, 20-30 km before Hanoi, we were met by a comrade from Relations with democratic countries Sector at the Foreign Ministry. In the outskirts of Hanoi, close to the railway station, there was an official ceremony with the Deputy Minister of Foreign affairs Ung Van Hien, the chief of Protocol at Foreign Ministry, members of Parliament and the City Council, other governmental and social organizations, diplomats, members of the International control committee, the French representative and the Indian consul, journalists, etc. There were honor guards as well. The Deputy Foreign Minister delivered a welcome speech, after which I responded briefly.

On the morning of April, I was received by the Deputy Foreign Minister (Comrade Pham Van Dong had left for India). The meeting was attended by the Protocol chief and the chief of Relations with democratic countries. I handed in copies of my speech and the letters of accreditation. We talked for some time and our Vietnamese comrades asked a lot of questions, mainly on the economic situation of our country, and some on our relations with Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey.

The same day we were invited by Chairman Ho Shi Min for dinner, attended by: the Secretary of the Party Truong Shin, the Deputy Foreign Minister, and the Vietnamese ambassador to Beijing Hoang Van Hoan, who is actually working in Vietnam. Ho Shi Min welcomed us simply and cordially, and greeted us in Russian. He asked me what language we were going to speak, and added that he knew the Bulgarian language was a Slavonic language, so we would be able to understand each other in Russian (interpreters were not allowed). During the dinner, he briefly informed us about the situation in Vietnam, inquired about Bulgaria, and often made jokes with the Vietnamese comrades present. He asked about our economic progress, the agricultural products and industrial production. He inquired after Comrade Chervenkov's health, if he was still the Secretary General of the Party, what were the names of the Secretary of the Central Committee and the Chairman of the Presidium of the Parliament. He requested brief information on our state organization and drew a chart of their governmental structure. He spoke with great

affection about his acquaintance with Comrade Georgi Dimitrov, he said he was a close friend with Comrade Vasil Kolarov, with whom they had worked together in the Comintern. He said Comrade Kolarov was a very intelligent person, a good Marxist and he spoke French fluently.

He described briefly the difficult situation of the Vietnamese people, which was the result not only of the continuous, almost 10-year war, but also because the French monopolists did not build anything in Vietnam, they did not develop the country, they did not do what the British capitalists did in India, where they built several industrial plants. All in all, Ho Shi Min said, the French monopolists in Vietnam were led by the principle “take from the people, put into your pocket”. French imperialism was really marauding imperialism.

He also informed us about the ongoing agrarian reform. Difficulties arose mainly from the lack of well-trained specialists, who would be able to implement the ideas of the Party. He made a joke that the slogan of the Party was “work with the peasants, eat with the peasants, sleep with the peasants”. “It is difficult for our intelligentsia to realize this slogan. To work with the peasants – yes, but to eat and sleep with them – it would be hard for them to get used to that” – Ho Shi Min finished in laughter.

Regarding the economic difficulties and being far behind, he was positive that with the help of fraternity countries, they would be able to overcome them.

Ho Shi Min, as well as other important Vietnamese comrades, asked whether we were going to appoint a permanent representative in Hanoi. My reply was negative. I explained that the reason was purely of financial nature – we are a small country with limited financial recourses. I added that until recently we did not have a diplomatic representative in Korea, and we still do not have one in Mongolia.

On the next day, 9 April, I handed in my letters of accreditation in a modest set-up, following the protocol – there was an honor guard company, comprised of the best soldiers, who fought for Dien Bien Fu, and we heard the national anthems.

Following the ceremony, we had a short conversation with Ho Shi Min, but no important issues were brought up.

On 10 April, I started the routine protocol visits. Besides my visit to the Deputy Foreign Minister, I also visited the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party Truong Shin.

Following my talks with important Vietnamese comrades, ambassadors and members of the Control Committee, I can outline the political situation in Vietnam as such:

While the total population of the country is 25 million, half of them – 13 million - live in Northern Vietnam (DRV). The supreme power is in the hands of the Parliament, constituted in 1946, when the French intervention started. In some areas, elections were held under French aircraft bombardment. 333 members of Parliament were elected at that time, 70 % of them were members of the Labor party (then Communist party), 5 socialists, 6 catholic and the rest – former mandarins. A large part of the MPs took part in opposition. Forty-two men have been killed since 1946. Some MPs ran away with the French to the south. The last session of the Parliament (fourth in a row), held from 20 to 26 March this year, approved the government policy. It was attended by 206 members of Parliament altogether, out of whom 5 socialists and 3 catholic. The former chairman of the Parliament, who died recently, did not belong to any party, he was a former mandarin.

The Parliament elects the President and the Prime Minister. Both positions are taken by the same individual. There is no Parliament Presidium.

The Labor party has enormous influence. According to information from the Control Committee members, the Party is very influential in the south as well. Therefore, the Americans fear elections and are trying to spoil them. Ho Shi Min has the affection and respect of the people, who call him “Uncle Ho”.

Currently, there is an agrarian reform going on in Vietnam. So far, it has been completed on 1/5 of the territory of Northern Vietnam (DRV). The reform is being conducted region by region. Where it has not been completed yet, the rent of land has been reduced by 25%. The reform is straining the tension between classes. Landlords are opposing governmental initiatives and shooting at peasants at some places.

Unification of Northern and Southern Vietnam is a primary political task now. The government of DRV is complying strictly with Geneva conventions and is getting ready for elections.

Medical service is very bad. The total number of doctors is 300, and just one radiologist. In the past, the French did not accept more than 20-30 Vietnamese students annually in their medical schools. Unemployed French doctors used to cover the need of medical personnel. Last year, 250 students were enrolled in medical university and the same number – in secondary medical schools. It is expected that this year their number will grow.

The French have taken away almost all apparatus from the dispensaries.

There are about 1 million students in Vietnam, 50 000 of whom – in secondary schools, and 1 500 - in universities.

A big problem is education among national minorities, who are over 60 in number, with population over 2 million people.

On the economic situation in Vietnam.

Generally speaking, Northern Vietnam is a devastated country. Only Hanoi and the surrounding towns, which were liberated under Geneva conventions, have been preserved. We saw ourselves that the towns Lang-Son, Bak-Nin and the villages around them had been fully destroyed. Only the churches are still standing. I have seen demolished Stalingrad, however, there were some ruins of walls, while Bak-Nin, for instance, is literally wiped out. This is the situation in many more villages, especially in the so-called “White zone” (“No one’s land”), which was 3-5 km wide, used to pass through the most fertile fields and arced around Hanoi.

The roads and the irrigation systems have also been fully destroyed. A part of them have already been reconstructed.

Cattle – mainly buffaloes, which are the basic animal power in the Vietnamese village – have been to a great extent killed by the French. Due to the lack of water and cattle, about 150 000 hectares of fertile land were not used last year. It cannot be used now for the same reasons, furthermore people are starving and too weak to work.

As I already mentioned, the French did not build any economic facilities during their occupation. Currently, the following industries are on the territory of DRV:

A textile factory in the town of Nam-Din, one of the biggest in Vietnam, which employed 20 000 workers and processed about 10 000 tons of cotton annually. The French took away the most important machines, as a result of which the factory is not operating. It used to work with US cotton.

A brewery in Hanoi, which used to produce soft drinks, very necessary for the hot climate. This factory is not working either, due to the same reasons.

An electrical power plant, owned by a French company, 27 000 kW power, used by the Vietnamese government, the issue of ownership has not been settled yet. This power plant uses coal from a mine in the region of Haifon, exchanging electrical energy for coal.

A small coal mine with 15-20 tons of coal daily debit.

There is also a paper factory, whose machines were taken to the caves during the war for safety reasons. However, they are rusty now and not functioning.

Another important industry is the town tram network in Hanoi, which is being exploited by the French. Negotiations are being held to transfer the exploitation of the network into Vietnamese hands, or for joint use. No agreement has been reached yet. French capitalists want to export all the profit to France.

In addition to the above-mentioned industries, there are also art and craft workshops. They produce soap, fabrics and other consumer goods. It is believed that after taking over the town of Haifon, which began in the end of April and will finish on 16 May, DRV will own the following industries:

A coal mine with 2 million tons of high quality coal annual production. A contract has been signed with the French to buy this mine. It was bought for 5 billion francs, equal to 1 million tons of coal. Final payment will be completed in 10 years. Close to the mine there is a small power station.

A cement plant, which is still a subject of negotiations.

A glass factory.

The most significant asset for DRV after taking over Haifon, however, will be the port, which will connect the country to the outer world. All port installations, however, have been disassembled and moved to the south by the French.

Transportation service is bad. The only railway road, built by the French in Vietnam, connects Hanoi with Lang-Son to the north, with Haifon to the east, and Saigon to the south. The French destroyed the road and all bridges during their retreat. This line was rebuilt for a short time with the material and technical support of China, and is now connected with the Chinese railways. This is the only railway for transportation of goods from China to Vietnam, but because it is still new, movement is slow. The total railway inventory comprises 10-15 engines and several hundreds of carriages.

There are industrial products at the market in Hanoi and some other smaller towns. They are mainly of French, American and Japanese origin, however, they are being sold out. There are also Chinese goods. There is a variety of leather products – shoes, bags, etc. There is no fear or panic among retailers. Prices of some goods are going higher. The price of rice, for example, has increased by 50 % since January. The Vietnamese comrades hope that exchange of goods between North and South Vietnam will revive. They rely on goods from democratic countries as well, but have nothing to give in exchange.

As a consequence of the destruction during the war, as well as due to severe natural disasters – floods and droughts – people in some areas (in three provinces) are starving, many have died. The government is taking serious steps to fight famine – buying large quantities of food. Apart from this, China, the Soviet Union and Poland have imported rice. According to the Secretary of the Party, in some areas the situation is improving, though in others it is getting worse and many people are dying. The Secretary told me that the number of affected from famine in the three provinces is about 1 million. The reasons for this situation were summarized by the Party Secretary as follows: because of the war, a large section of the fields were not cultivated; the “White zone” around Hanoi included the most fertile land, which was not cultivated either; the population ran away from the French into the jungles; cattle was killed; the irrigation system was destroyed; droughts and floods. They, however, did not foresee this situation. They concentrated their entire attention and efforts on the implementation of Geneva conventions.

At the moment, not only the peasants are in a difficult situation, but also the workers and officials. All officials, who used to work in Hanoi, are paid salaries equal to those they received from the French, while new personnel, our cadre, get monthly

payment of 36-45 kg of rice (in monetary equivalent). This salary is not sufficient to feed one's family.

Our Vietnamese comrades are hoping to cope with this situation on their own, but they also hope to receive support from the fraternity countries.

In the beginning of January, Ho Shi Min called in the ambassadors of fraternity countries and announced the request of the government of Vietnam for assistance.

China has rendered so far the following support: 30 000 tons of rice, 10 million meters of fabrics. They also helped reconstruct the railroad, and mainly build bridges. I am not aware of the exact amount of support from China, but I am convinced that it is significant.

The Soviet Union has promised assistance amounting to 300 million roubles, Poland and Czechoslovakia – 30 million each, and the German Democratic Republic – 60 million – 30 million for 1955 and 30 million for 1956. In addition, a campaign is going on in Germany to collect contributions from workers, a part of which have already arrived in Hanoi. Hungary has promised to build a brick factory, to deliver machines, medications and other goods, without specifying the amount of supplies. Ho Shi Min thanked the Hungarian ambassador, but he said that Vietnam expected a bigger support from Hungary. The Romanian ambassador told me that they were going to deliver assistance as well, he did not know how much, though.

To date, however, the Vietnamese government has not utilized this assistance, except for the supplies of rice and some other goods. They have no plans, nor statistics, they do not know where to start. In this connection, Soviet specialists visited Hanoi recently and they examined the issues on-site and returned to Moscow to elaborate a plan for support.

During my talks with ambassadors from fraternity countries, I found out that the Vietnamese comrades were expecting assistance from us, as well as from Romania. As early as our trip from the border to Hanoi, when we were discussing my speech at my arrival in Hanoi, the deputy chief of Protocol at the Foreign Ministry said that I needed to mention the kind of support we would provide.

During my meeting with the Deputy Foreign Minister on 8 April, I realized that the questions asked in reference to our economic situation, and more specifically about the crops, about export of food to other countries, about trade with China, the progress of

our industry and other questions of that kind, were related to the issue of assistance to Vietnam. In order not to give any hope, I explained that the harvest was poor last year, and we started our industrial development on a very small scale.

The Secretary of the Central Committee, Comrade Truong Shin, was more concrete. He told me a lot about the past of Vietnam, about the fact that the French were not interested in economic development, or – more specifically – in industry, so they did not build anything. He was very specific about the difficulties they were having at this very moment. He concluded in the following words, which I managed to write down as the interpreter translated them: “Of course, we will overcome these difficulties – our people are very hard working. We will get on the road to socialism. We are currently involved in restructuring our economy, but we are too weak to have an economic fight against capitalism. The state sector in our country is very weak. We are convinced that we will resolve this issue with the support of our good comrades. They will help us the way they can, but mainly with equipment and specialists. The Soviet Union, China and other fraternity countries are helping us selflessly.” Then Comrade Truong kept silent – he was obviously waiting for my response. I could not give any promise, nor could I state that we were not able to help. I only said that I fully understood the difficult situation of the Vietnamese people.

In conclusion, I make the following proposals:

1. Even though the economic capabilities of our country are not very big, I believe that, taking into account the difficult situation of the Vietnamese people and the hope of the Vietnamese government for help, we should provide at least minimum support. I suggest this issue to be brought up to our government.
2. I believe that we need to have a permanent representative in Hanoi – if not an ambassador, at least charge d’affaires. This will be of great political significance for the Vietnamese comrades. With the presence of more representatives from democratic countries, they see support and perspective to stabilize their progress and achieve new success. This issue, as I already mentioned, was put forward by the Vietnamese comrades. The latter regretted to hear that we were not going to have our permanent representative.

Currently, the following fraternity countries have permanent diplomatic representatives in Hanoi: USSR – ambassador, China – ambassador, Poland – ambassador, Czechoslovakia – ambassador, GDR - charge d'affaires, however, an ambassador is leaving for Vietnam very soon, Hungary - charge d'affaires, Korea – ambassador. Only Bulgaria, Romania and Mongolia have no representatives.

Beijing, 3 May 1955

Sincerely,

/ D. Dimov, Ambassador/

[Translated by Greta Keremidchieva]