

"Hoa-Binh" from Le Monde (28 January 1973)

Caption: On 28 January 1973, in its coverage of the agreement intended to end the hostilities in Vietnam, the French daily newspaper Le Monde gives an initial account of the armed conflict and expresses concern over the country's political future.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Fauvet, Jacques. 28-29.01.1973, n° 8.722; 30e année. Paris: Le Monde. "«Hoa-Binh»", p. 1.

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‘Hoa-Binh’

It was in the year 1868: a French fleet launched an assault on Annam. This marked the beginning of the colonial era in Indochina as the European imperial powers set about splitting up Asia. With luck, this long period is now coming to an end, at least in Vietnam. Right up to the last minute, fighting has been fierce and the bombing deadly, but on Sunday a great silence will at last settle over the country. Already, in the North, the inhabitants of Haiphong and Thanh-Hoa can sleep in peace, albeit in the midst of chaos. Now people in Da-Nang, Can-Tho, Ban-Me-Tuot and Pleiku will be able to understand the meaning of the word ‘hoa-binh’ — peace — for the first time in more than a generation.

To reach this point took almost a century of resistance, cultural, political and armed, to French colonisation, and another 19 years following the Geneva Agreements. As always in this kind of war, the material damage is easier to assess than the human toll: 14 million tonnes of American bombs and munitions, thousands of rockets launched, not to mention napalm and defoliants. We also know, almost to the man, how many American soldiers died, but how can we assess how many Vietnamese soldiers and civilians perished? Moreover, in this kind of conflict, where do we draw the line between soldiers and non-combatants? And here we are only talking about the dead. One day, the real assessment will have to include all those who were mutilated or traumatised, the millions of Vietnamese who will have — and at what price? — not only to adjust to peacetime but also to try and reconnect with a culture, traditions and a way of life that war and foreign influence have greatly impoverished.

Vietnam will undoubtedly have to initiate a thoroughgoing process of decolonisation, but before it can do so it will have to achieve, and this will be no easy task, a degree of national entente. Each faction admits that the ceasefire does not spell peace; it is a first step, but a step towards what?

Three governments for such a small country in search of unity is too many. The hostility between the Thieu regime and the Provisional Revolutionary Government is such that one faction will have to disappear, or at least change radically. It is true that the two rival ministers of the South, thanks to the most extraordinary diplomatic finesse, finally found themselves in one and the same room, attesting by their signatures their assent to the same agreement. Many wars end like this but the animosity that remains is such that the rebuilding of the South and the recovery of the various public authorities will be impossible for many months. The ceasefire should in theory also allow for the emergence of the so-called ‘third force’, but that force is to a large extent made up of men still held in camps and prisons in the South. It is no foregone conclusion that President Thieu will do ‘everything possible’ to give them their freedom, as provided for in the agreement.

In these circumstances, Prince Sihanouk is perhaps not mistaken in announcing the beginning of the third war in Indochina. To be sure, this war will be mainly political, but it could be accompanied by renewed armed clashes. The question is whether this time the conflict will remain confined to local forces or whether the United States will again enter the fray, in one way or another.