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A Pause As The World Holds Its Breath

Like a pair of street fighters, American troops and the Viet Cong are warily circling each other in Viet Nam, throwing an occasional punch then pulling back a step to see what the other will do.

First there was the Christmas truce--broken by the Viet Cong; the Americans resumed their pounding of North Vietnamese troops in the South but no bombs were dropped on the north. The Hanoi troops stepped up mortar attacks and then proposed a four-day truce during the lunar New Year next month.

The world hardly dares whisper the word "de-escalation" in such precarious circumstances. And yet the orders for the bombing pause came directly from President Johnson in what must be a diplomatic move because such an interlude, as one U.S. officer said in Saigon, makes no "military sense".

Washington is speculating on two possible reasons for the pause: Significant peace feelers may be out from Hanoi, or the President may simply wish to indicate to America's allies who have been urging an end to the bombing, that he is doing everything possible to promote negotiations.

As far as the North Viet Nam government is concerned, there is no doubt it is risking severe censure from its chief ally in Peking for suggesting any cutbacks in the fighting. The Chinese, who stand to gain the most from the Viet Nam war, have been doing everything in their power to keep North and South Viet Nam at each other's throats as fiercely as possible.

In the midst of this possible peace offensive, a stumbling block is reported to have arisen in Saigon in the person of Premier Nguyen Cao Ky. Premier Ky is said to have warned the United States that any sort of peace conference was out of the question at this time because of the effect it would have on the Saigon government.