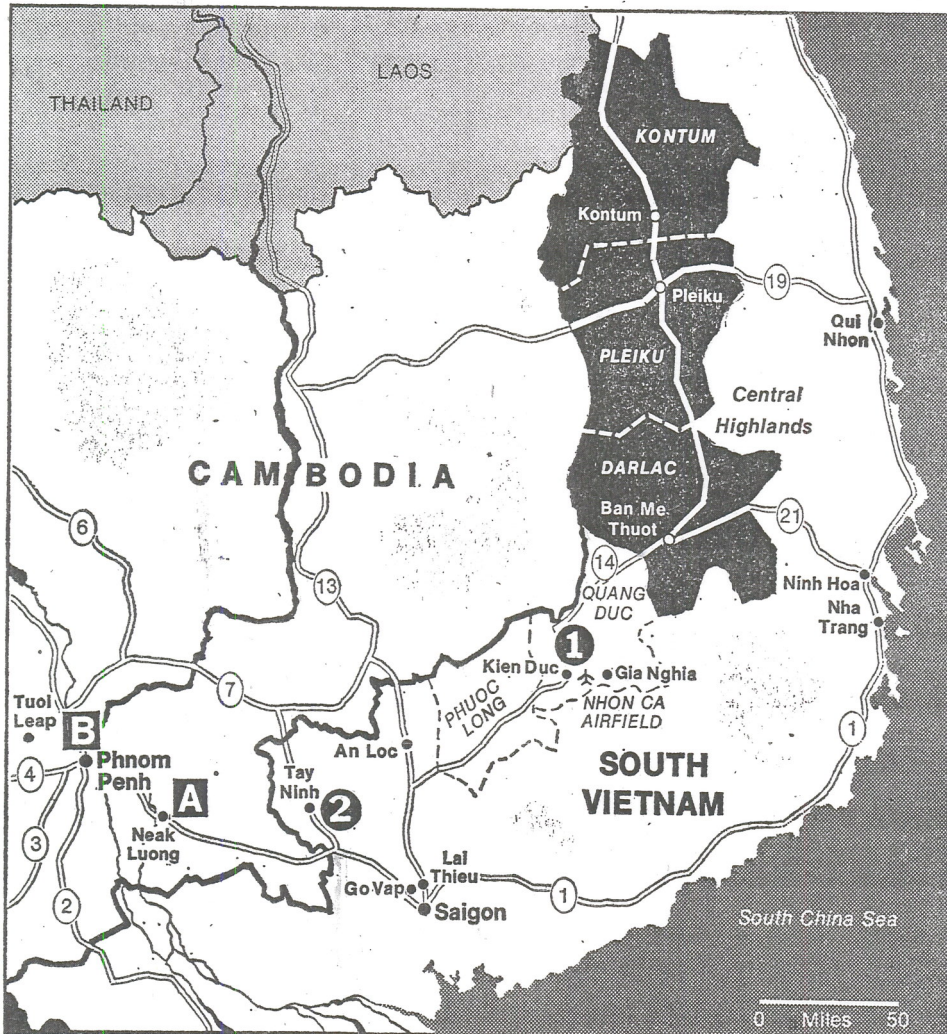


# SOUTH VIETNAM REPORTED YIELDING MOST OF CENTRAL HIGHLANDS AS MAIN EVACUATION ROUTES CUT OFF



Saigon decided to abandon a roughly three-province area in Central Highlands (shown in black). Kien Duc (1) was target of Communist drive, and heavy fighting was reported in Tay Ninh area (2). In Cambodia, airstrip of encircled Neak Luong (A) was attacked by insurgents, and rebel pressure was maintained on Phnom Penh (B).

## A MAJOR PULLOUT

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Saigon Takes Action After Two Weeks of Sharp Reverses  
NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Tuesday, March 18—The Saigon Government has decided to abandon most of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam because the area has become militarily indefensible, well-placed Western sources said today.

The decision, one of the most momentous of the long Vietnam war, was made after 14 days of sharp military reverses in the vast, rolling highlands. It was certain to have important political reverberations.

The area to be abandoned was reported to include the pivotal border provinces of Darlac, Pleiku and Kontum, which were the cradle of American involvement in the war and which cover most—but not all—of the high, mountain studied plains that are commonly regarded as making up the Central Highlands.

Defensibility Considered

These provinces are divided

along administrative lines, however, while the Saigon military command's decision could be expected to follow lines of military defensibility, perhaps leaving parts of the three provinces still within its new line of defense and consigning parts of adjoining highlands provinces to the other side.

It could not be learned how swiftly the movement of Government forces from the highlands—and particularly the important cities of Pleiku and Kontum—was unfolding.

According to some accounts, Government units were trekking down little used paths and provincial roads because the two main routes leading out of the region, 19 and 21, are cut.

#### Speedy Action Taken

"I think it can be said that the Vietnamese moved very quickly," one Western analyst said this morning, "and that once the decision was made it was carried out with considerable speed."

The well-placed Western sources said that, with the civilian populations alerted to the pullout, airports had become a difficult withdrawal route and that most of the troops—and civilians who wanted to leave—might have to fight their way out.

The decision to abandon the area was reportedly made sometimes after Friday when President Nguyen Van Thieu flew to the coastal city of Nha Trang to confer with Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, commander of Military Region II, which includes a stretch of the central coast as well.

#### Staff Shifts Headquarters

Starting late last week, after the North Vietnamese seized the important highlands town of Ban Me Thuot and began rocket attacks on the corps headquarters and airfield at Pleiku, General Phu quietly began moving his staff to Nha Trang. The western defenses of Pleiku itself were threatened with tank-led attacks reported around the key district seat of Thanh An.

Reported to have weighed heavily in the decision to abandon the region were the vastness of the highlands, the

#### Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

enhanced North Vietnamese logistics and road systems, on which they have been feverishly working since the signing of the Paris peace agreements in January, 1973, and the increasing number of Communist troops in the area.

Also, with Routes 19 and 21 cut since the Communists began their highlands offensive on March 4, the South Vietnamese Air Force, already restricted by cuts in American assistance, faced the prospect of a long, costly airlift to the embattled area, with little likelihood of its paying off in the long run.

#### Decision Ratified

On Saturday, according to one account, the National Security Council in Saigon ratified the decision that Mr. Thieu and General Phu sketched out in Nha Trang. It could not be learned what kind of consensus Mr. Thieu had built up for the move, which is expected to be a stunning blow to the morale of the nation. But there were no visible signs of dissent.

Military analysts have long considered the withdrawal an eventual necessity. General Phu had only two regular infantry divisions, the 22d and 23d, to defend his vast corps command. The bulk of the 22d had been committed to the defense of Binh Dinh Province, which rises from the ricelands of the coast to the highlands.

The 23d Division was believed to have been battered in the fight for Ban Me Thuot, which the North Vietnamese attacked early on March 10.

In addition, the II Corps area had roughly the equivalent of a division, about 10,000 men, in rangers and perhaps another division of regional forces.

#### Hanoi Force Put at 45,000

The exact strength of the North Vietnamese forces in the area is a matter of guesswork, though last month one reliable Western estimate put the total at 45,000.

But since then there have been reports of heavy infiltrations of North Vietnamese into the area. The Saigon command charged last week that elements of the 316th Division, a famous one that fought at Dien Bien Phu, had been seen in the highlands.

In addition, the North Vietnamese 320th and 10th Divisions are believed to be operating in the Darlac-Quang Duc area of the southern highlands, the 968th around Pleiku and the 3d at Binh Dinh.

The Communists also have regional forces and autonomous regiments—those not attached to a division—in the highlands.

#### 'Not All Black

One Western military analyst said that the pullout decision was "not all black" in that it would permit the South Vietnamese forces to regroup in the more defensible coastal areas, where their lines of communication are shorter and those of their foes extended.

A measure of the success of the regrouping operation, which is unparalleled in the recent history of the war, will be the number of troops and civilians who manage to walk, ride, fly or fight their way to the coast.

One knowledgeable informant said that one escape route appeared to be the little used

provincial route leading out of Phu Bon Province to the town of Tuy Hoa on the coast.

It seemed possible that some military or civilian refugees might manage to move down Route 21 from Ban Me Thuot to Ninh Hoa on the coast. That highway is cut near the town of Khanh Duong, but Route 19 is cut in many places.

#### Road Has Been Improved

Also, army engineers have been improving an old French colonial road descending from the Quang Duc Province capital of Gia Nghia to Di Linh on Route 20.

One of the last correspondents known to be in Pleiku, Nguyen Tu, who works for the respected daily Chinh Luan, described the town on Sunday as a nightmarish place. He said people were running around the streets "as if they were caught in a trap," clinging to their most precious possessions. He said every imaginable kind of vehicle was being used in efforts to get out of the city, but that there was no real exit.

#### Series of Assaults

In yesterday's fighting, North Vietnamese tanks and troops mounted heavy assaults in remote, mountainous Quang Duc Province and stepped up attacks around Saigon, the military command said.

The regional thrusts, which the command called a nationwide Communist offensive, are now viewed with increased anxiety by Western military analysts. "It's grim and it's going to get grimmer," said one knowledgeable Western military source. "Every military region is in trouble now."

In recent weeks, the South Vietnamese have lost a vital province capital, Ban Me Thuot, retained only a tenuous grip on the key city of Tay Ninh, 65 miles northwest of Saigon, shifted the II Corps headquarters to Nha Trang, lost a half dozen district capitals in the highlands and other areas and witnessed a series of increased attacks around Saigon.

The Saigon command's spokesman, Lieut. Col Le Trung Hien, said in response to a question on Monday that the North Vietnamese attacks are "more serious" than the 1968 Tet offensive and the spring offensive of 1972. "The situation will be very critical if the enemy can cut the vital routes permanently," he said.



United Press International

South Vietnamese soldiers helping villagers flee from an enemy attack about 50 miles northwest of Saigon