

U.S. Military Men Doubt Saigon Turnaround

By DREW MIDDLETON

United States military sources say that the North Vietnamese have almost completed preparations for the final battle in the Saigon area and that they doubt strongly that the Saigon garrison has sufficient troops or weapons to launch a spoiling attack that could seriously interfere with the northerners' operational plans.

The North Vietnamese forces are massing in the Saigon area, the American sources say, without any sign of effective interference by the South Vietnamese Air Force.

Shortages of transport, especially helicopters, the sources believe, will prevent the three South Vietnamese divisions on hand from carrying out a mobile, counterattacking defense.

Revival Is Questioned

Official Saigon claims of a revival of military activity around the coastal ports of Tam Ranh, Phan Rang, Phan Thiet and even Nha Trang are regarded with some skepticism. Sustained counter-actions by troops in those areas could buoy morale, but there is no expectation that such actions

would influence the main battle developing in the Saigon area.

The Southern troops in the coastal area, according to reports reaching Washington, have lost most of their heavy weapons and have used up their fuel and much of their ammunition. They may be able to divert some of the North Vietnamese units that are moving south, but this diversion is unlikely to affect Communist plans for Saigon.

The North Vietnamese analysts estimate, have now deployed about 15 divisions in the campaign leaving two in North Vietnam and one guarding communications along the frontier. The total manpower is estimated at 350,000, including 100,000 support troops. Six divisions have been identified in the Saigon sector, but there is a strong probability that two other divisions have been moved into the area.

18,000 In From North

The North's divisions were said to be prepared for "high-intensity" operations. Their usual infantry complement of three regiments, or about 10,000 men, has been augmented by tank battalions and additional field and anti-aircraft artillery and combat engineer units.

Hopes for a successful defense of Saigon have risen slightly as a result of the arrival of approximately 18,000 men of the Marine and First and Second Infantry Divisions, extricated from the northern part of the country.

These troops are now being re-equipped. Originally, the three divisions were regarded as among the best in the South Vietnamese armed forces.

American officers with experience in Vietnam are highly

doubtful about the prospects of the South maintaining a prolonged defense of the capital and eventually "turning the war around," despite the assertion by Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, the Chief of Staff, that the Saigon forces retain the capability of defeating the north.

Offensive Now Leisurely

Had the Saigon forces been able to hold the coastal ports, one military source said, there might have been a possibility of reversing the tide. But the collapse in those ports, even more than the earlier collapse in the Central Highlands, has freed sufficient North Vietnamese troops to build up an overwhelming force in Military Region III, around Saigon, and the Military Region IV in the Mekong River Delta.

The expected Communist offensive in the delta has been opened by the North Vietnamese at a leisurely pace, largely in the form of shelling and rocketing that make preliminary moves to armored and infantry action.

As the situation is seen from Washington, the North Vietnamese forces in the delta can operate deliberately because the shortages of fuel, ammunition and spare parts in the three divisions there are more acute than in the Saigon area. The best that can be expected from these troops is defensive action.

Washington sources emphasize that there are approximately 200,000 militiamen of varying degrees of reliability in the Saigon and delta areas. If the regular forces still had their original mobility, the militia would be useful for guarding

MI S m e s u r e i h e P n t g n n t e r

Not Vena asmremn aoud-Sagn hn oth ienn a. hs estimate includes the militia and, consequently, is not regarded as an important factor in weighing the coming battle.

Hanoi's tactics in the final battle for Saigon will be strongly influenced, experienced military and civilian analysts believe, by its reading of the political situation within the capital.

Continued control by President Nguyen Van Thieu, these sources said, probably will convince the Communist high command that only an all-out assault upon Saigon can win the ultimate victory. This assault, they believe, will be preceded by intensification of operations in the delta to cut off that region, and its rive, from Saigon and by a southward move to the sea southeast of the capital.

Thieu May Be the Key

Once these objectives are attained, the major drive will begin, probably from the north and east.

The removal of President Thieu, the sources said, probably would alter Hanoi's plans. His replacement by a government pledged to make peace would be a reason for avoiding the costly alternative of an assault on the capital.

The arrival of additional military supplies from the United States does not appear to be a matter of great concern to Communist commanders, according to qualified sources. The Hanoi estimate is that no amount of logistical support now can re-establish confidence in ultimate victory among South Vietnamese forces. Moreover, there is some doubt whether the supplies now being brought in by American airlift can reach the front lines.

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South Vietnamese soldiers who fled from Communist advance turning in weapons at Long Hai, on coast, on Thursday