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Saigon's Need for Shorter Lines

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The survival of the South Vietnamese Army as a credible defensive force now appears to depend on an early disengagement from its present positions and a retirement to lines closer to the capital. The most critical aspect of a swiftly deteriorating military situation is an acute shortage of reserve units to plug holes in the defense perimeter. The command in Saigon is forced to weaken one critical but inactive sector to strengthen others under attack.

Military Analysis

The situation has worsened as a result of these developments:

¶The North Vietnamese have mounted powerful and successful drives in the Xuan Loc sector, 30 miles east of Saigon.

¶The Bien Hoa airfield, the base for over half of South Vietnam's remaining fighter-bombers, has been virtually neutralized by persistent shell and rocket fire.

¶Strong columns of truck-borne infantry have been observed approaching Bien Hoa and the Saigon River corridor that runs south to the capital.

Effort Seen as Too Late

In this situation, in the view of the American analysts, the efforts of the South Vietnamese Government to reorganize 22,000 troops salvaged from the disasters in the northern provinces and the Central Highlands will not succeed in time to affect the present battle.

The reorganization may have moved faster than expected, as Pentagon sources maintain, but it has not yet reached the point where the forces are ready to intervene. They still need tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery, according to a qualified source.

With the Communists probing the defenses north and east of Saigon with strong forces, the Government has no choice but to gamble desperately with what reserves it has. One such gamble was made yesterday.

Its Forces Unable to Plug Gaps, May Have to Pull Back

The Third Armored Brigade, which has been guarding the northern approaches to Saigon, was shifted 50 miles to Trang Bom, 15 miles west of Xuan Loc, in the hope that it could contain two Communist drives of tanks and infantry developing northwest and southwest of that battered city.

The brigade's success at Trang Bom, the military analysts emphasize, could make up for the weakening of Saigon's northern defenses caused by its transfer. Until yesterday it had been counted upon to contain any offensive against Bien Hoa.

Long Lines of Trucks

From operational reports reaching Washington, it is evident that the Communists intend to exploit the situation. With heavy artillery and rocket fire limiting fighter-bombers based at Bien Hoa, reconnaissance planes report long columns of truck-borne infantry moving south.

The fall of Phan Rang, on the coast 160 miles northeast of Saigon, will have only a peripheral effect on the outcome of the campaign, in the view of the American sources. The loss of the air base at Phan Rang further reduces the flexibility of the South Vietnamese Air Force, but otherwise the operation is expected to have little influence on the situation around Saigon.

Air force losses from anti-aircraft missiles, shelling and sabotage continue to be heavy—far heavier, some American sources believe, than Saigon is willing to acknowledge.

A major problem facing the air force is what it will do if Bien Hoa falls to Communist ground attack or is made untenable since the main airport at Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, is already overloaded.

Hanoi's deployment in strength of weapons systems that have been used sparingly

if at all has been an important, perhaps decisive, factor in its successes of the last 48 hours.

The Seventh Division's attacks around Xuan Loc were accompanied by more tanks than the South has reported in any single engagement thus far, the American sources said.

Heavy Guns in Use

At Xuan Loc and Bien Hoa the Communists have used 122-mm. and 130-mm. field guns and what one report described as massive and 130-mm. field guns and what one report described as massive rocketry. The North thus has superiority in weapons as well as the superiority in manpower it has enjoyed for the last week.

For all tactical purposes, the American analysts said, seven-day battle for Xuan Loc is over. Communist exploitation depends upon the ability of the armored brigade at Trang Bom to hold its increasingly difficult position.

Granted North Vietnam's superiority in men and weapons all along the front, it is quite possible, the sources said, that its high command will be content to pin down the armored brigade and apply pressure elsewhere. The most likely area, they believe, is Bien Hoa, whose fall would bring rich rewards: the elimination of the South's main air base, the isolation of the troops between Xuan Loc and Bien Hoa and attainment of a good position for an advance on Saigon.

In this tactical situation, it is difficult to see how the South Vietnamese forces can extricate themselves and fall back—or, as an officer put it, what they can fall back on.

Some defensive positions have been constructed around the eastern and northern faces of Saigon, it is reported, but they require strong air and artillery support and fresh, confident troops.

The terrain south, southwest and west of the capital offers some protection, but it is unlikely that Hanoi would launch an attack across country laced with canals and waterways when it has a clear run from the north.