

BATTLE EXPECTED NEAR LAOS TOWN

MAR 6 1971

Saigon Reported Preparing
Ring of Landing Zones
in Tchepone Region

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Saturday, March 6 — More South Vietnamese troops moved westward across the enemy's supply-trail network in Laos yesterday, and helicopter-borne advance units were reported preparing a ring of troop landing zones near the key junction town of Tchepone.

An assault appeared imminent. Tchepone, a transshipment point for enemy supplies on Route 9 about 27 miles inside Laos, has long been battered by United States air strikes. But heavy fighting has flared as the South Vietnamese have approached.

Spokesmen for the Saigon command said yesterday that a South Vietnamese infantry battalion engaged in a three-hour battle with North Vietnamese regulars six miles east of Tchepone Thursday afternoon and killed 42 of them.

The command announced that its advance into Laos, being carried on by 18,000 troops, had reached points 25 miles inside Laos. More than 1,000 South Vietnamese troops reportedly moved by helicopter to a point three miles south of Tchepone, The Associated Press said.

According to United States helicopter pilots at the allied base at Khesanh in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam, preparations were under

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way to establish at least two artillery fire bases in the Tchepone area. They said these were two and a half miles west and north of the town.

The United States command reported yesterday that two more helicopters were shot down over Laos on Thursday, bringing to 34 the number destroyed by enemy ground fire there since the Laotian operation began Feb. 8. Another helicopter, the command said, was shot down Thursday eight miles south of Quangtri, in the northeastern corner of South Vietnam.

Helicopters over the Tchepone area have been under fire by an apparently new rocket-powered anti-aircraft weapon in recent days, although United States Military officials here said yesterday that none had been hit by it.

Pilots have described the projectiles as small, possibly radar-controlled, 122-mm. rockets that are fired in bursts and do not resemble the SAM surface-to-air missiles that the North Vietnamese use against supersonic aircraft.

Changing Nature of Sweep

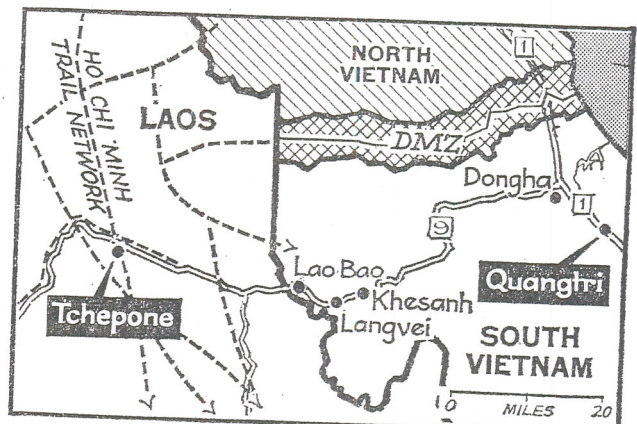
Just as the North Vietnamese appear to be changing the nature of their response to the American-supported push into Laos, so has the South Vietnamese approach shifted in the last three days. Saigon apparently has decided that static defense of the hilltop positions it established nearly a month ago has cost it heavily in casualties.

The South Vietnamese have now moved into what their spokesmen described as the "second phase," and have moved at least nine miles beyond their previous advance positions 16 miles inside Laos.

The advance during the first phase, which began with the border crossing Feb. 8, was cautious once the 16-mile point was quickly reached. Stiff resistance from the enemy was not encountered until about Feb. 21, when an assault north of Route 9 overran a South Vietnamese ranger battalion.

Little movement occurred until last Wednesday, when United States helicopters began flying South Vietnamese troops westward.

To counter increased enemy



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Saigon units in Laos were preparing helicopter-landing zones near Tchepone. To guard rear flank of operation, U.S. troops in the Quangtri area shifted closer to DMZ.

activity against the operation's rear flank in northernmost South Vietnam, United States military sources here said, about 2,000 American troops of the 23d Infantry Division have been shifted within Quangtri Province, near the South China Sea and closer to the demilitarized zone.

Foe Shells Dongha

An enemy shelling of a forward base north of Dongha there on Tuesday dropped about 1,000 artillery shells and rockets on the post's defenders and caused some damage.

Elsewhere in South Vietnam yesterday, the United States Army Base at Longbinh outside Saigon was hit by about 10 enemy rockets. The command said there were light casualties.

Longbinh rarely comes under attack. But many South Vietnamese troops who normally provide security for the provinces around the base and around Saigon have been moved into Cambodia and Laos in operations now involving nearly 50,000 troops.

In another operation, in the mountain highlands where the borders of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia come together at a principal outlet of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network 335 enemy soldiers, and 19 South Vietnamese have been killed since the action began Feb. 26, the command said.

Hanoi Reports U.S. Force Near.

TOKYO, Saturday, March 6 (AP)—A Hanoi broadcast said today that four United States landing ships with 1,500 American marines aboard had ap-

proached close to the North Vietnamese coast in the southern panhandle "ready for action."