

Shift of Best Troops to Cambodia and Laos Worries

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 8 — An apprehensive mood reigns in the countryside around Vietnam's capital city, whose defense has been left to irregulars and auxiliary forces while nearly 50,000 of Saigon's best troops have been moved out of the country to fight North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and Laos.

The fighting in those countries has been some of the bloodiest in the war—almost 900 South Vietnamese troops were reported killed in the last week of February—but it has obscured the fact that, in the hamlets and villages of the home country, the war keeps grinding on, in smaller ways.

What leads to apprehension is the comparatively low level of enemy activity within South Vietnam at the moment. "The low points are often indication of high points to come later on," one American civilian official said here today.

And an American military officer said: "It's so quiet around Saigon we're worried. We've moved so many troops out of the area that I hate to think about what could happen."

Series of Enemy Moves

As if to show what could happen, although not necessarily for that reason, in the past few weeks enemy forces have made these moves:

¶ Infiltrated saboteurs into an American artillery base near the Cambodian border, attaching explosives to an 8-inch howitzer and blowing it up, then attacking a Vietnamese auxiliary-forces base near Tay Ninh.

¶ Fired some 122-mm. rockets at the sprawling American army compound at Longbinh, 20 miles from Saigon, wounding a few G.I.'s there.

¶ Fired rockets at the United States air base at Danang twice since Feb. 21, destroying one of the C-130 planes that fly supplies for the Vietnamese forces in Laos.

¶ Fired rockets into Dongha and Quangtri near the rear

bases for the Laotian operation and sabotaged the American ammunition dump at the Quantri combat base.

In Vietnam, "quiet" is a relative term. What is meant in the military region around Saigon alone in the month of February was 66 assassinations, 62 kidnappings, and terrorist attacks in which 103 civilians were wounded. The figures for January were about the same, even in South Vietnam's northernmost military region.

Numbers Are Very Real

The numbers look cold and abstract on the computer print-out sheets by which the Americans here keep track of them. But for the people who are part of them they are very real.

For the residents of the coastal city of Phan Thiet, only about 100 miles east of Saigon, it meant that a Vietcong sabotage squad was able to fire 30 rockets and mortar shells into the town on Feb. 26 and kill three citizens.

When field police and auxiliary forces went to the outskirts of Phan Thiet to investigate, they were attacked by what they said was a battalion—about 500 enemy troops—and an eight-hour battle ensued in which 21 of the foe were reported killed.

The battle at Phan Thiet was followed by an ambush three days later of a United States Army engineer convoy traveling on Route 1 a few miles outside the city and later by rocket and mortar attacks on Vietnamese army installations nearby.

But such activities have become almost routine in Vietnam, particularly in such relatively unsecure provinces as the one around Phan Thiet.

Enemy Reported Slowed

United States military sources, while conceding they are waiting with fingers crossed while vital areas of the territory of Vietnam are left undefended because of the troop needs of operations in Laos and Cambodia, assert that the incursions have made it more

difficult for the enemy to be as disruptive as he would like to be in South Vietnam.

But they say that it always takes time for the real effect of an operation to be felt here. "They'll come back with more terrorism, and sabotage," said Michael G. McCann, an American aid official who oversees security matters. "But they've been damaged badly."

An American colonel was more apprehensive about leaving the Saigon military region slightly covered, and particularly about taking some of the best troops in Vietnam—airborne ranger battalions—from bases in Saigon and moving them north to participate in the Laotian operations. One of those battalions was virtually wiped out on the weekend of Feb. 21.

"We don't like to talk about

it," the colonel said. "They are being stretched thin and the only way to keep an operation like the one in Laos going is to take troops out of III and IV Corps—the areas from Saigon south to the delta.

There are now 40,000 United States troops in the Saigon military region. Last May there were 86,000.

Unexpected Repercussions

The operations beyond the borders can also have unexpected repercussions within them, as was shown last week by an intense battle in Kontum Province in the mountain country where the border of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos meet.

Elements of three North Vietnamese regiments, perhaps moved down from the fighting around the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in Laos, perhaps chase

Saigon Area

up from the current 23,000-man Vietnamese operations around the Chup rubber plantation in Cambodia, suddenly turned up in Kontum and in the subsequent fighting with a South Vietnamese battalion more than 330 of the enemy were reported killed.

"I can't recall any battalion-size operations up there in a long time," one American officer said last week. "There was really a hell of a fight up there."

Another operation that has been almost totally ignored recently began Dec. 1 in the U Minh forest on the southern tip of South Vietnam, the forest area had long been left to the enemy. Asked for information about the U Minh campaign today, a Vietnamese military spokesman said "Later, when Laos is not so urgent."