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## SAIGON'S FORCES IN LAOS PULL BACK

Quit Hill Positions Near the  
Key Town of Tchepone —  
Combat Termed Sporadic

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Saturday, March 13 (AP) — South Vietnamese forces in Laos pulled back yesterday from positions near Tchepone, former transshipment point on the enemy's supply trail complex.

Clearing skies brought United States helicopters back in force over the Laotian panhandle. Ground fighting during the day was described as sporadic.

"We don't need to stay at Tchepone," said one South Vietnamese staff officer. "We don't want to be in the position of sitting ducks. We want to keep mobile."

A regiment of South Vietnamese infantrymen was said to have pulled out of Fire Base Sophia and moved southeast toward the South Vietnamese border. Sophia is two and one-half miles southeast of Tchepone. Other units had moved east toward Fire Base Lolo.

### Occupied Last Week

Tchepone, a bombed, abandoned town on Route 9, some 25 miles west of the South Vietnamese border, was occupied last Saturday by South Vietnamese units in their westernmost push into Laos.

The troops reportedly left Tchepone early this week for positions in the surrounding hills because the valley town was vulnerable to attack. South Vietnamese staff officers at Hamghi headquarters in northernmost South Vietnam said their troops had completed their mission of searching the area and destroying enemy supplies.

About 22,000 South Vietnamese troops are operating in Laos and it was apparent that they would strive to be as mobile as possible in an effort to avoid recurrence of the bloody battles early in the campaign when they were holding fixed positions.

### 'All-Out Gamble'

The commander of American forces supporting the Laos operation, Lieut. Gen. James W. Sutherland Jr. said the North Vietnamese had tried an "all-out gamble" in their attack on hill positions earlier in the operation.

General Sutherland said that Hanoi's troops had inflicted heavy casualties on Saigon's forces, but that enemy losses had been far greater, about 10 to 1, in the mass attacks.

The general said three North-Vietnamese regiments were in the Tchepone area. They are "sort of beaten up," he said. "The regiments are not in good shape."

South Vietnamese headquarters reported no significant fighting in Cambodia where Saigon's drive has advanced as far as 25 miles across the border at some points on a broken front stretching about 50 miles from the Seoul region west to the area of the big Chup rubber plantation.

The United States command said last night that one Cobra helicopter gunship had been downed by enemy ground fire in Cambodia. It said the two men aboard were killed.

### Hanoi Sergeant Tells of Warning

SAIGON, March 12 (Reuters) — North Vietnamese forces were warned of a South Vietnamese attack in southern Laos last October, or four months before it started, and were told they must crush it at any cost, a former North Vietnamese master sergeant said at a news conference here today.

The sergeant, 33-year-old Nguyen Trong Quyen, said his unit received its final orders to move into the battle zone Feb. 2, or three days after Saigon's preparatory build-up began and six days before South Vietnamese troops crossed the border.

Answering reporters questions, the sergeant said that North Vietnamese forces on the Ho Chi Minh Trail network always had at least 30 minutes' warning before American B-52 raids.

The sergeant surrendered to a Saigon squad on Feb. 18.

### Pentagon Skeptical

WASHINGTON, March 12 (UPI) — Pentagon officials said today it would have been impossible for the North Vietnamese to know about plans for the Laos invasion last October because planning did not begin until December.