

COPTERS SCATTER AS ENEMY SHELLS BASE AT KHE SANH

Rocket and Mortar Attack is Termed Heaviest Since Siege of Post in 1968

By Craig R. Whitney
Special to The New York Times

Saigon, South Vietnam, Tuesday, March 16 - The allied base at Khesanh came under intense shelling yesterday, forcing American helicopters based there to scatter into the sky.

American spokesmen reported that about 150 rockets and mortar shells

and mortar shells struck the outer perimeter of the allied air and logistical support base in northwestern South Vietnam for Saigon's operation in Laos. The shelling was said to be the heaviest since the base was under siege in early 1968, when it was manned by United States marines.

The attack started at 4 P.M., apparently timed to coincide with the return of American helicopters from their operations in support of the South Vietnamese forces across the border. The attack, the biggest at the base since the South Vietnamese operation against the enemy's supply-trail network started on Feb. 8, lasted about two hours.

Spokesmen described the damage as light, with no fatalities.

Helicopters Take Off

When the attack began, most helicopters at the base took off for other areas, including the Quangtri combat base farther east.

American pilots, meanwhile, reported having destroyed seven enemy tanks in Laos yesterday morning four miles southeast of the junction town of Tchepone, close to the South Vietnamese units deepest inside Laos. Tchepone is about 25 miles west of the border.

[Heavy fighting was reported through the day at the South Vietnamese regimental position called Fire Base Lolo, nine miles southeast of Tchepone, The Associated Press said.]

The South Vietnamese Army, which announced that its infantry had occupied the areas around Tchepone on March 6, has since moved out to the southeast, but the Saigon command has imposed secrecy on its exact positions.

"This is not because we are having any difficulty applying our tactics, but because we had an indication of enemy movement in the area and we didn't want them to have any information on ours," the command spokesman said.

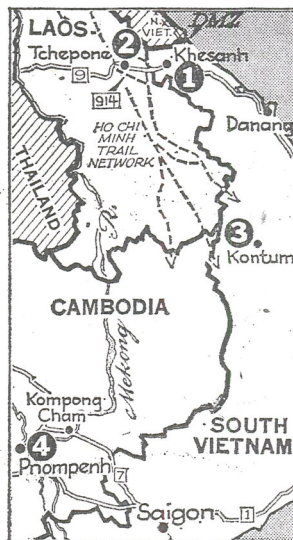
But he added that Saigon still had forces operating "in the vicinity of Tchepone." Most of them are reportedly moving

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southeast of the city on a branch of the enemy supply trails known as Route 914.

About 150 miles farther south, in the South Vietnamese Highlands close to the Laotian and Cambodian borders. South



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Khesanh [1] was shelled. Battles were reported in Tchepone area (2). The Kontum area (3) has also been scene of sweep. In Cambodia, fighting broke out near Pnompenh (4).

Vietnamese forces have been conducting an operation involving several battalions against elements of three North Vietnamese regiments since Feb. 14.

These troops have remained in Kontum Province, the spokesman in Saigon said. There has been little significant fighting, according to the command, although it said 563 enemy soldiers had been killed, most of them by air strikes.

In Sunday's fighting in Laos, an official communiqué reported two small battles seven miles west of the South Vietnamese border. Two South Vietnamese soldiers were reported killed, and 17 wounded.

But, the communiqué also said that in the 24 hours ended at 6 P.M. Sunday, 57 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed, with 18 missing and 172 wounded in the Laotian operations.

No details were given on what caused these casualties, nor on the report that 653 enemy soldiers were killed in the same period.

American helicopters kept up their support of the operation Sunday with more than 1,000 sorties, the United States command said, and 250 fighter-

bomber strikes and 11 B-52 strikes were flown for the forces in Laos.

The American ground forces protecting the rear of the operation from Quangtri to Khesanh and up to the border also saw some action Sunday, when an army engineer unit was hit with mortar fire nine miles west southwest of Khesanh and an element of the 101st Airborne Division battled with an enemy force midway between Khesanh and Quangtri. The command said no Americans were killed.

Four American soldiers were killed yesterday when a United States Army UH-1 Huey helicopter crashed at Tansonnhut Air Base just outside Saigon. Military spokesmen described it as an accident.

Sharp Clash Near Pnompenh

PNOMPENH, Cambodia, March 15 (AP)—Fierce fighting was reported today between Government troops and enemy forces 13 miles northeast of Pnompenh. The Cambodian commander said his men were overrunning entrenched enemy positions by nightfall.

The Cambodian command said scout units sweeping the banks of the Tonle Toch River south of Kompông Cham Lang clashed with an enemy force of 200 to 300 men.

At last report, five Cambodians had been killed and 10 wounded, the Government said that 30 enemy dead were found.

U.S. Force in Vietnam Now Down to 317,300

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 15 (Reuters) — The United States military command said today that as of March 11 the number of American personnel in South Vietnam had fallen to 317,300, the lowest figure since Oct. 10, 1966.

The Nixon Administration has pledged that the United States will have fewer than 284,000 men in Vietnam by May 1 and that American forces will then have no ground combat assignment.

The latest total does not include about 19,000 Navy and Coast Guard personnel operating off the coast of South Vietnam.

WELLINGTON, New Zealand, March 15 (UPI) — New Zealand will step up withdrawal of her forces from South Vietnam, political sources said today. These forces consist of one infantry company and a 150-man artillery battery serving with the Australian task force in Phuochuy Province.