

SAIGON'S FORCES STILL MOVE BACK IN LAOS FIGHTING

**Big Losses on Both Sides
Reported as Reds Force
Fire Base's Evacuation**

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By ALVIN SHUSTER
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, Thursday, March 18 — Some South Vietnamese forces in Laos continued to move southeast back toward the border yesterday, trying to consolidate their positions after running into intense Communist attacks.

Spokesmen in Saigon reported that the South Vietnamese forces operating south of the key Route 9 both suffered and inflicted heavy casualties in withdrawing Monday and Tuesday from an artillery outpost called Lolo. The spokesmen put Saigon's losses at 16 killed and 190 wounded and said that 1,100 Communists were killed. Reports from the field said that South Vietnamese casualties were higher than the official reports.

As the more than 1,000 South Vietnamese troops moved to a base five miles east, they continued to meet enemy resistance. But spokesmen insisted that the troops were managing to consolidate positions and to disrupt Communist supply lines at the same time.

The activity of the other South Vietnamese troops in Laos was not reported in detail.

Troops Move to Landing Zone

Lolo, the latest fire base evacuated by South Vietnamese troops, lies about nine miles southeast of Tchepone, a strategic road junction that was held for about five days by South Vietnamese troops.

Official South Vietnamese spokesmen say their troops are following a strategy of jumping around to avoid giving the enemy time to fix mortars and rockets on their positions. They have now moved into Landing Zone Brown about five miles to the east of Lolo.

In evacuating Lolo, the spokesmen said, the South Vietnamese troops "did not have time to bring all of their artillery." Reports from the field said that American B-52 bombers had later dropped bombs on the equipment left behind.

The South Vietnamese have been saying that their departure from Lolo was orderly but the comments today suggested otherwise. The South Vietnamese are outnumbered in Laos by enemy forces that include elements of five divisions. But the allies feel they are offsetting the numerical superiority of the Communists with intense air assaults by the giant B-52's, smaller planes and helicopter gunships.

North Vietnamese troops, meanwhile, continued their rocket and mortar attacks on the sprawling allied base at

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Khesanh in South Vietnam but no major damage was reported.

Landing Zone Attacked

By The Associated Press

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Thursday, March 18 (AP)— Heavy fighting was reported in Laos yesterday around a base that hard-pressed South Vietnamese troops were trying to hold 14 miles from their border.

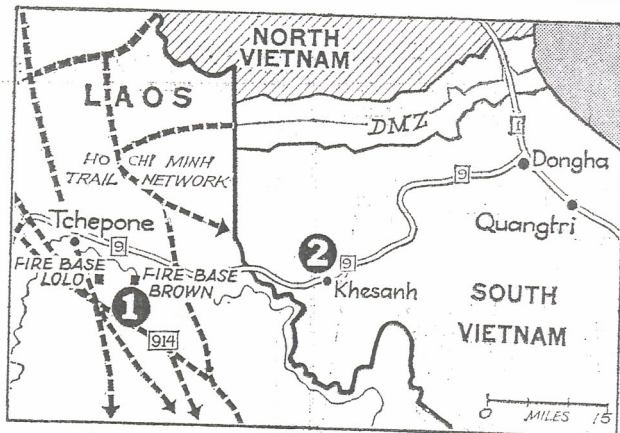
Some troops that had been operating 25 or more miles inside Laos have been falling back under increasing enemy attacks since the end of last week, and United States pilots said a new retreat under pressure seemed imminent.

But South Vietnamese headquarters insisted that the pullbacks were tactical. [According to Agence France-Presse, a spokesman said that, despite the pullbacks, no soldiers had been evacuated from Laos and that the strength of the task force attacking the enemy's supply-trail complex remained at 21,000 men.]

Gunships Are Called In

Reports from the Laotian front said that the North Vietnamese had kept up a rain of artillery, mortar and rocket fire through the day on the base called Landing Zone Brown and that they had also launched some probing attacks on the ground. After nightfall, United States helicopter gunships were called in to try to beat back the attackers.

The previous night, according to South Vietnamese officers, the South Vietnamese defenders had pulled out of the



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Fierce fighting was reported at Landing Zone Brown (1). The allied base at Khesanh (2) was shelled anew.

base, and 100 to 150 North Vietnamese soldiers had moved in. Strikes were made by United States planes, and when the South Vietnamese returned to the base yesterday morning they were said to have found the bodies of 80 North Vietnamese soldiers.

American pilots said yesterday that Landing Zone Brown was still being defended by infantrymen who had been reinforced. But the base has to fall, one pilot said, because the North Vietnamese are "hitting it around the clock."

Pilots noted that the South Vietnamese had already abandoned two of their four fire bases south of Route 9, the main path of their advance into Laos. Landing Zone Brown had been intended by the South Vietnamese First Infantry Division as a base for raids southward against the branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail known as Route 914.

Some of the defenders at Brown were troops of South Vietnam's First Division who pulled out of Fire Base Lolo, five miles to the west.

Pilots also reported that

enemy propaganda trucks mounted with loud speakers had moved into the area and were calling for the South Vietnamese soldiers to surrender.

The South Vietnamese thrust against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos began Feb. 8 and was carried as far west as the area around Tchepone, a major transshipment point 25 miles from the border. Field officers said last week that the drive would turn southeast in an attempt to destroy enemy supply links before the major portion of the operation ended by early April.

The South Vietnamese have insisted from the start of the campaign it was not designed to occupy territory, and it has been clear they do not want to risk extended lines of supply or the chance of being without United States air support when bad weather sets in.

Since the South Vietnamese began moving out positions around Tchepone, however, the North Vietnamese have stepped up their pressure. The prospect appeared to be one of more bitter fighting back toward the border.