

U. S. COPTERS LIFT 1,000 OUT OF LAOS; FIGHTING IS BITTER

Saigon Insists Withdrawn
Troops Will Be Replaced
—Reports New Plan

BATTALION CHIEF DEAD

Washington Still Optimistic,
Says Foe's Supply Lines
Are Being Disrupted

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Friday, March 19—Hundreds of battered and weary South Vietnamese soldiers were lifted out of Laos by American helicopters yesterday after some of the fiercest fighting of their campaign against Communist supply lines.

The number of troops returned to northernmost South Vietnam was estimated at 1,000 to 1,500, or about three battalions. Spokesmen insisted that more South Vietnamese troops would soon replace those pulled out, but no sign of fresh troops preparing to cross the border could be seen in the North.

[In Washington, Administration officials continued to insist that the South Vietnamese were disrupting the enemy's supply lines. But in the midst of expressions of optimism, there were suggestions that the enemy had increased activity in the northern half of the demilitarized zone between the two Vietnams.]

The South Vietnamese infantrymen withdrawn from Laos yesterday, some of whom were seen hanging onto the skids of the helicopters, were taken to Hamngi near Khesanh, the main allied base in South Vietnam for air and logistical support.

Commander Is Killed

The body of Lieut. Col. Le Huan, the commander of the fourth battalion of the First Infantry Division's First Regiment, was among those carried back.

The colonel's troops were survivors of the furious fight that has raged for the last four days around Fire Base Lolo, about 21 miles from the Laotian border. The infantrymen evacuated the base after heavy Communist assaults and then headed for the position called Landing Zone Brown, about five miles away.

Intense fighting was reported in the area of Brown yesterday. There were reports that it had been evacuated, but Saigon spokesmen insisted that its troops were still in the area.

About 500 of those pulled out were exhausted from the battles around Lolo and Brown.

The remainder came from positions nearby.

"We have no plan to pull out our troops from Laos at this time," a Saigon spokesman commented angrily here yesterday. "It is not true that we have been forced to pull back. We have a new plan for operations in other areas and other directions."

Since the South Vietnamese occupied and then withdrew from Tchepone, the strategic

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road junction 25 miles inside Laos, they have been moving southeast back toward the border of northeastern South Vietnam in what their spokesmen describe as a "mobile strategy" aimed at further disrupting the enemy supply network.

The area, south of Route 9, the key supply road from the border, has been the scene of the heaviest fighting in recent days, with South Vietnamese troops evacuating Fire Base and then Lolo.

There has been little word on the activities of the bulk of the 20,000 South Vietnamese troops operating elsewhere in Laos.

A force estimated at 3,000 has been sweeping through the area southeast of Tchepone, meeting increased Communist resistance.

Among the soldiers returned yesterday were those involved in one of the costliest battles of Saigon's 39-day campaign against the Ho Chi Mihn Trail network. Spokesmen reported that the troops were attacked for the fourth consecutive day as they were moving toward landing zone Brown from the abandoned Lolo.

50 More Reported Killed

After several hours of fight yesterday morning, the spokesmen said, they suffered 50 killed and 80 wounded.

This brought to 110 the number of South Vietnamese reported killed in the operations around Lolo this week. More than 270 were reported wounded, with an undisclosed number still missing.

The South Vietnamese spokesman, however, asserted that 567 North Vietnamese were killed in yesterday morning's fighting. Saigon now says that 1,667 enemy soldiers have been killed in four days of fighting around Lolo, most by American planes supporting the South Vietnamese troops.

The fighting became so intense, American spokesmen said yesterday, that B-52 bombers were called in to provide close air support for Saigon's forces, a job normally handled by smaller fighters and bombers.

Another reflection of the fury of the battle came in the official report that American medical evacuation helicopters flew 60 sorties Wednesday, 40 more than the usual daily average.

Setback for Foe Reported

SAIGON, March 18 (AP)—"We are still in Laos, but concentrated near the Vietnamese border now," a South Vietnamese headquarters spokesman said today.

The spokesman, Lieut. Col. Do Viet, said the South Vietnamese troops were south of Route 9 and were moving to "let the U.S. bombers attack North Vietnamese troops massing in the area."

The Saigon headquarters also reported a major setback to Communist forces in Cambodia, where 20,000 South Vietnamese troops have been operating against enemy supply lines and troop concentrations with the aid of American air strikes.