

# VIETNAMESE REDS REPORTED OPENING PUSH IN HIGHLANDS

## Troops From North Attack a Government-Held Town Astride Their Road Net

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Monday, March 10 — As fierce fighting raged along a severed highway in the Central Highlands, North Vietnamese troops reportedly opened a new front in the region yesterday by attacking a base camp that stands astride their independent road network running down the western spine of South Vietnam.

At the same time Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, the Government commander in the Highlands, ordered a "red alert" in the usually peaceful province of Darlac, expecting that attacks might spread there. Government troops from the 23d Division were ordered to occupy all high buildings in Ban Me Thuot, the province's capital, authoritative sources said.

The Saigon command reported that North Vietnamese troops shelled and attacked the strategic town of Duc Lap, which is 31 miles southwest of Ban Me Thuot and four miles from the Cambodian border.

### A Lonely Outpost

Duc Lap is a lonely outpost on Route 14 which connects Gia Nghia, the capital of Quang Duc Province, and Ban Me Thuot. The post blocks the southward extension of the North Vietnamese Truong Son highway system, which detours into Cambodia north of the town.

Duc Lap is believed to be lightly defended — most of its troops are stretched out along route 14 — but it houses a large number of tanks and armored personnel carriers.

Though under ground attack, the town maintained radio contact with Government planes flying overhead, the command said. North Vietnamese troops were also said to have shelled two outlying outposts south of the town.

Meanwhile, an independent report from the field said that about 2,000 Government rangers from the Highlands and two regiments of the 22d Division, or about 4,000 men, from the coast were pushing along route 19.

The highway, which links Pleiku and the coast, is critical to the defense of the Highlands defense. It has been cut in several places.

Government tanks, armored personnel carriers and troops were seen moving east of the district capitol, Le Trung. Communist gunners on a nearby

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mountain shelled bridges the column had crossed to cut off its retreat.

The rangers are trying to dislodge North Vietnamese troops of the 95B Regiment of the Yellow Star Division from Camp 94, which was captured five days ago. The camp lies in the Plei Bong Valley, 22 miles east of Pleiku, where a Communist-built road almost crosses Route 19.

At the other end of the road, three miles west of Binh Khe, other troops from the Yellow Star Division have also cut Route 19.

On both highway fronts the Saigon command reported heavy fighting. The advancing South Vietnamese troops around Binh Khe were said to have killed 139 Communist soldiers while seven of their own men were killed and 35 wounded.

At one spot Government forces were attacked by ground troops after coming under intensive heavy weapons fire, the command said. The town of Binh Khe was reported to have been struck by rockets.

The Highlands command reported 52 North Vietnamese troops killed in the Plei Bong Valley area. Two of the Government's armored personnel carriers were known to have been knocked out and two others damaged.

Military sources in the Highlands said North Vietnamese tanks had been sighted in the Plei Bong valley. Ranger jeeps were seen moving TOW wire-guided antitank missiles to the Plei Bong front.

Western sources said that nine bridges and culverts had been knocked out on Route 19. None has been repaired so far because of the heavy fighting.

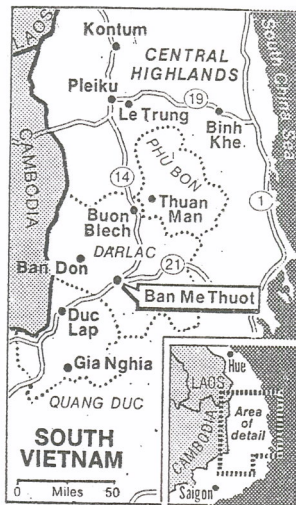
In addition, two bridges have been destroyed on Route 21, the other usable road leading out of the Highlands.

On Saturday, a battalion of North Vietnamese troops seized Thuan Man, a small district capital 36 miles north-east of Ban Me Thuot.

Its montagnard defenders ran after the first ground attack, military sources said, as did its montagnard district chief, who was later arrested in the capital of Phu Bon Province. General Phu has ordered the man court-martialed.

### Attack Causes Surprise

The attack on Thuan Man surprised the government forces, which had been expecting a thrust against a reinforced outpost called Ban Blech, the sources said. Ban Blech lies southwest of Thuan Man, a half-mile east of Route 14.



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### To meet any attacks in Darlac Province, Saigon reinforced Ban Me Thuot.

Well-placed sources said that at the time of the attack on Thuan Man, a North Vietnamese truck convoy and a troop unit about the size of a regiment were seen moving in the direction of Ban Me Thuot on a trail running parallel to Route 14. The column was attacked by Government fighter-bombers.

It was the movement of this force that prompted General Phu to order the top priority, or "red," alert for Ban Me Thuot.

However, military analysts thought the Communist troops might also thrust at Ban Don, a Government outpost in western Dar Lac Province, which has been the staging point for Government raids on traffic and depots on the Communists' highway system.

The North Vietnamese campaign in the Highlands—which some analysts believe is aimed at cutting the region's major roads and isolating its towns—had been expected for some weeks.

But while attention focused on the highlands, heavy fighting was also reported from the southeastern part of Thua Thien Province in the north, where Government units in recent weeks had succeeded in retaking some high ground from which Communists had shelled the Phu Bai air base, which serves Hue.

One Western analyst said the attacks seemed to be aimed at retaking the high ground. However, he said, it will become apparent in the next few days whether the North Vietnamese may attempt to push farther east in an attempt to cut Route 1 and isolate Hue.

The Saigon command reported that the headquarters of the First Division, seven miles southeast of Hue, had been shelled by 85-mm. artillery.