

VIETNAM REDS PUT TROOPS AND TANKS IN HIGHLAND CITY

A Bitter Battle Is Reported
in Ban Me Thuot as Planes
Strike Invading Armor
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OUTLOOK TERMED GRIM

North Vietnamese Also Take
District Capital in Area
and Besiege Another
NYTimes

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 10 — Government soldiers and North Vietnamese troops were fighting house-to-house battles in the embattled province capital of Ban Me Thuot this afternoon and fighter-bombers struck tanks in the town itself, military sources said.

A Western military analyst said the situation looked very grim for the defenders, who were buffeted by a predawn attack on the graceful Central Highlands city, the capital of Darlac Province, which has a lingering French colonial charm.

Eight American missionaries and a United States Government official were reported to be trapped in the city, but, according to an embassy spokesman here, were all right. About a hundred French and Italian planters, missionaries and small-business men also live in the area.

Communist Armies Assayed

It was not clear whether the Communists hoped to take and hold Ban Me Thuot and its rich surrounding district, which have a population of 150,000 montagnards, Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese. Military analysts speculated that the attackers might be hoping to draw Government units into a costly engagement.

Firm Communist control would almost doom the Saigon Government's efforts to hold onto isolated Quang Duc Province, to the south, and would dramatically shrink its hold on the Central Highlands, which Communist theoreticians have termed the key to the control of Indochina.

As fighting raged in the Central Highlands and other parts of the nation, a small but important district capital southwest of Ban Me Thuot was officially reported taken by the North Vietnamese and a second was said to be under siege. Military sources said the Communists appeared to have overrun Duc Lap, a district capital 31 miles southwest of Ban Me Thuot, and were threatening Kien Duc, 60 miles to the southwest.

Controls a Highway

Of the two, Duc Lap, which is four miles from the Cambodian border and roughly equidistant from Ban Me Thuot and the Quang Duc Province capital, Gia Nghia, is by far the most important. It controls Route 14, blocks an independent North Vietnamese road system from the north and, if captured as reported, could prevent the Government from moving ranger units now in Gia Nghia to the defense of Ban Me Thuot.

The attack on Ban Me Thuot—the boldest military stroke by the Communists since their 1972 offensive—began at 3 A.M. with demolition soldiers and ground troops striking from the northwest and southeast according to several accounts.

The Saigon command said that 400 rounds from heavy weapons hit the vicinity as North Vietnamese troops assaulted a small airstrip on the northeastern fringe, the main airfield four miles to the east,

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an ammunition dump three miles to the west and an administrative center six miles to the east-southeast.

The night before Government troops including montagnard regional units and militiamen, took up positions on high buildings from which they apparently fired on Communist soldiers who penetrated into the heart of the town.

One account said that the defenders managed to repulse the first wave and kill a number of sappers, who were followed by tanks, but that in the early afternoon a second thrust could not be contained and fighting spread into the city.

Tank Losses Claimed

By late afternoon, according to a military source, Government fighter-bombers were striking tanks in the middle of town. The Saigon radio said three had been knocked out in front of the sector command at the southern edge of the city, two in front of the province chief's house and seven others on the outskirts. There was no way of confirming the claims, which have been exaggerated in the past.

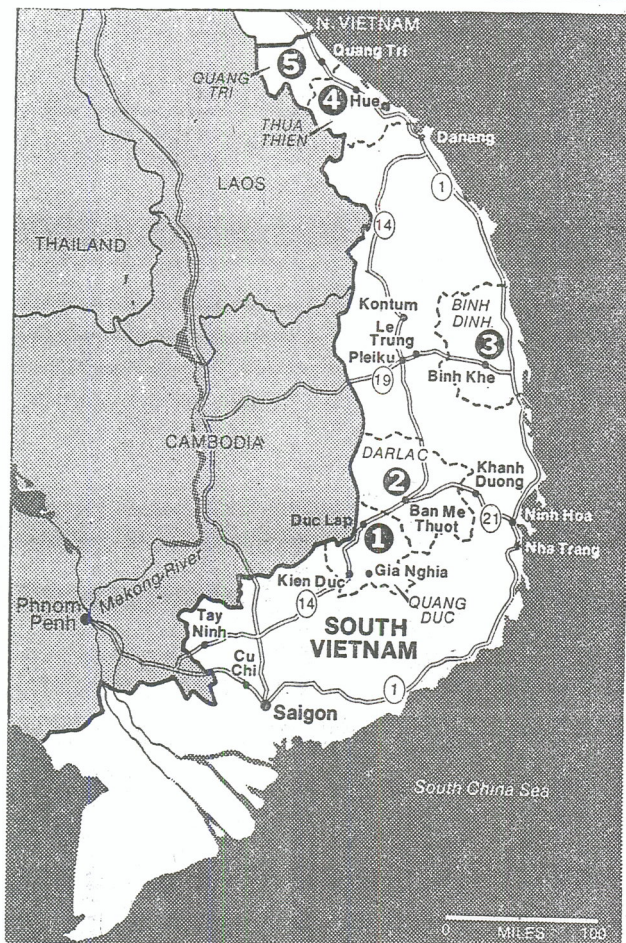
A small landing strip at the edge of town appeared to have been taken by the Communists, but it was not clear who controlled the main airfield, where, the highlands command reported, 100 North Vietnamese were killed by a Government reconnaissance company.

As for the American missionaries, Paul A. Struharik, representative of the American Consulate General in Nha Trang, was believed to have sheltered those reported to be in Ban Me Thuot. Some are resident representatives of the Fundamentalist Christian Missionary Alliance, which is active among the Rhade tribe of Montagnards, and others are students at a Montagnard language institute.

In the Communist attack on Ban Me Thuot in 1968 five missionaries were killed and two were taken into captivity; a sixth died of wounds.

An Indonesian and two Iranians, delegates of the International Commission of Control and Supervision, are believed to be in Ban Me Thuot. Last August the Polish and Hungarian missions withdrew from the site, which analysts considered a stor msignal at the time.

Heavy North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire on the edges of town appeared to make an attempted helicopter evacuation



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Communist units reportedly overran Duc Lap (1). Fighting continued in Ban Me Thuot (2) and around Binh Khe (3). Attacks increased near Hue (4) and Quang Tri (5).

of the Americans a risky undertaking.

Reinforcing the town is a problem for the South Vietnamese highlands command, with two of the roads leading out of Ban Me Thuot apparently cut and a third endangered.

The size of the Government garrison was uncertain, but it is known to have included elements of the 2,000-man 53d Regiment, whose command post was in Duc Lap. One military source said the defenders probably did not number much more than 1,000.

A Western source speculated that the North Vietnamese might have used two regiments of their 320 Division, or several thousand men, in addition to local guerrillas.

Pleiku is the nerve center for the Government's battle for the highlands, which is being fought not only in Ban Me Thuot and in Quang Duc Province but along severed Route 19 and in Binh Dinh Province, which shades down to the South China Sea coast. Forty rockets hit the airfield there,

according to a telephone operator.

The Saigon command reported extremely heavy fighting around the town of Binh Khe, on the eastern stretch of Route 19, which has been cut, and said that over 150 North Vietnamese were killed by air strikes and ground forces. Two regiments of the 22d Division, or 4,000 men, are trying to reopen Route 19 around Binh Khe.

At the other end of the highway, in the Plei Bong Valley

East of Le Trung, a district capital, North Vietnamese troops have seized two Government base camps and are apparently well dug in. A military source said Government ranger units were having difficulty dislodging them.

The other road from the highlands, Route 21, from Ban Me Thuot to Ninh Hoa, on the coast, has also been cut around Khanh Duong, a district capital.

Fighting has picked up in the northernmost provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, but it was unclear whether this presaged a determined North Vietnamese push or simply an effort to pin down the first-line Government troops in the area.

U.S. Accuses North Vietnam

WASHINGTON, March 10 (AP) — The State Department again accused North Vietnam today of gross violation of the Paris peace accords and said

that it had moved 50,000 troops to South Vietnam since mid-January.

Although cautioning that the information was incomplete and "the details sketchy," a press officer, Robert Funseth, said at a news conference that "our intelligence indicates continued heavy offensive actions." "The new offensive demonstrates gross violation of the Paris agreement and a renewed escalation of the fighting," he added.

Evaluation Expected

The headquarters of the Christian Missionary Alliance in Nyack said yesterday that its Saigon office had reported that United States Embassy helicopters would attempt to evacuate Americans from Ban Me Thuot and other points in the area.

All 13 of its missionaries in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, were evacuated Feb. 27.