

Highland Provinces Back at Stage Center

By IVER PETERSEN

With the word that they will be abandoned to North Vietnamese military pressure, the Central Highlands provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Darlac again are center stage in South Vietnam's long and bloody drama.

The three provinces, forming a huge arc of rain forests and rolling grasslands stretching over 200 miles south from the Laotian border, have played important if reluctant military and political parts in the war.

Just 21 years ago, in February, 1954, the French colonial command flew some of its scarce reserves into Kontum and Pleiku to counter a gathering Viet Minh offense there. The French expressed confidence that the attack could be repelled, but it was not. The fall of Kontum in what was then called Annam marked the onset of the final deterioration of the French position in the south, just as the collapse of Dien Bien Phu a few months later snuffed out French domination in the North.

Trouble for Americans

A decade later, in 1965, the Americans were there. A mortar and grenade attack against an allied compound in Pleiku killed eight American advisers, providing the late President Lyndon B. Johnson with a further argument for greater American intervention in South Vietnam.

And a year later, the Kontum battlefield gave America its first hero in a conflict that came to be considered a war without heroes: Capt. William S. Carpenter, with his 101st Airborne troops surrounded by the Vietcong and about to be overrun, called the American bomber and artillery spotters and reportedly said, "Lay it right on top of us. We're being overrun, we might as well take some of them with us." He survived the explosives and napalm barrage, and won the Distinguished Service Cross, the country's second-highest military honor.

Then late in January, 1968, the highland provinces came under sudden and intensive North Vietnamese and Vietcong attack. For a few days, the attack seemed like another of the many regional Communist drives. But suddenly it spread north to Hue and south to Saigon and the Mekong Delta; it proved to be the opening gun of the Tet offensive, which raised the first widespread cries of doubt, and then of despair, about the American role in the Indochinese war.

Most recently, Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac

Province and the southernmost of the three abandoned provinces, became the anchor of a drive by the North Vietnamese when it was attacked and progressively occupied by them.

The Central Highlands, covering 20,000 square miles including parts of adjoining provinces that Saigon is not giving up, actually consist of two geographical areas. The larger, the Cao Nguyen Dac Lac, stretches north from Ban Me Thuot some 175 miles to a peak at Kontum Province's northern edge, covering most of the abandoned area. This plateau section varies in elevation from 600 to 1,600 feet interspersed with irregular jungle-covered peaks.

Between the peaks lie the overgrown relics of colonial rubber plantations and the scars left by the slash-and-burn nomadic farming system of the montagnards, or mountain tribes.

The smaller area of the Highlands rolls southward into more hospitable farming and plantation regions around Dalat, an old mountain resort town, and lies outside the section that will be left to the North Vietnamese.

Montagnard Country

The latest census puts the Central Highlands population at 600,000. Many of these people are montagnards, whose role in the Communist offensive has been in doubt. Long considered racially inferior by the Vietnamese but befriended by the colonial French, the montagnards have fought the Vietnamese on and off since the 16th century.

Each of the three province capitals has its own character and quality. Ban Me Thuot, the southernmost, is little more than a small town even by South Vietnamese standards. Surrounded by the peak-roofed communal long houses of the montagnards, built on stilts surrounding the town, it is considered the montagnard capital of the highlands. Pleiku, about 80 miles north along the twisting Route 14 from Ban Me Thuot, is far larger. It was considered a cool and charming resort village by the French colonialists from Saigon and the surrounding plantations. But later, it suffered the effects of an influx of refugees and became a honky-tonk haven for pleasure-seeking American soldiers nearby.

Kontum, about 30 miles north of Pleiku, is a much smaller settlement. It was a rest-and-resort town for the French and an important center for missionaries and sociologists working with the mountain people.