

Highlands Defenders: Overextended, and More

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 18—In two weeks, the generals of the North Vietnamese divisions in the rugged Central Highlands moved their men, tanks, artillery and anti-aircraft weapons like chess pieces.

News The two main highways leading out of the highlands were severed,

a number of key outposts and district capitals were handily taken and then—as a demoralizing, apparent checkmate—the once pleasant provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot was turned into a battlefield before dawn on March 10. The Communists again prevailed.

The cornered South Vietnamese faced an unpleasant choice: try to retake Ban Me Thuot, further straining the already thin garrisons of Pleiku and Kontum—or some other front—or face a humiliating setback.

At first, President Nguyen Van Thieu seemed determined to try the first, risky move—Ban Me Thuot, the word went out, was to be retaken at any cost. But on Friday, Mr. Thieu flew to the coastal town of Nha Trang to huddle with Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, an ascetic-looking soldier who was captured by the Vietminh fighting for the French in the historic French disaster at Dien

Bien Phu.

By Friday, the effort to retake Ban Me Thuot from the east had bogged down. So a decision as bold as the North Vietnamese attacks was made—evacuate the highlands of its garrisons, weapons and, as much as possible, its population.

Mass Move Under Way

An epic movement of people, vehicles and weapons—100,000 people are possibly involved—is now snaking out of the highlands down a disused, bumpy provincial road to the relative safety of the South China Sea coast. It is unclear how it is going.

However it turns out the mammoth retreat from the highlands is part of a strategic movement that some analysts now believe is irreversible: pulling back to the defensible Vietnamese heartland that the Saigon Government still controls.

"You have to remember," said a Western military analyst who knows the country well, "that once you do this in one place, it becomes easier to do it in another."

The highlands have been an alien land to the ethnic Vietnamese, who often shouldered aside the indigenous mountain peoples in ways reminiscent of the American pioneers and the Indian tribes. But, unlike the Americans, the Vietnamese never imposed an indelible cultural stamp on the frontier. Few South Vietnamese

wanted to fight and die for the highlands.

American soldiers, American bombers and other American military largesse had enabled the Saigon Government to extend itself in the highlands—as in other parts of the country, including the vital Mekong Delta. But when the Americans slipped away, and their largesse too, an extended position became an overextended one.

On maps, the Saigon side controlled the major roads and the major population centers. But what most maps did not show was a sinewy set of roads, pipelines and depots that the North Vietnamese, who are perfectionists when it comes to logistics, had strung through the highlands. By the time of their attacks, they even had roads encircling the two main garrison towns of Pleiku and Kontum.

The political shock of the retreat from the highlands has not yet been felt here because the Saigon Government has not yet told its people what has happened—though many, even the humble, already have inklings. But it is certain to be a numbing shock.

Today Premier Tran Thien Khiem took the highly unusual step of flying to the city of Da Nang to hold a meeting with his Cabinet.

"We have learned something from the French Government," said one official here, referring,

with grim humor, to the movable cabinet meeting of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

Whatever else it might have been, the Da Nang session was clearly an effort to reassure the jittery people of the northernmost provinces that they, too, will not be marching south to a truer heartland.

After the 1968 lunar new year offensive and, particularly, after the bloody 1972 offensive, the people of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces are gunshy. Fighting that would not have much rattled Mekong Delta rice farmers sent tens of thousands of people pouring into Hue city in the last two weeks.

It is not at all clear that the Saigon side has resigned itself to the loss of a city like Hue—poignant, battered symbol of traditional Vietnamese civilization in this ravaging century.

But other, marginal areas—some of which, like two recently captured district seats in the hills of Quang Tin Province—may be left by default to the other side, which is dramatically revising what it calls "the balance of forces."

Already, for example, there are reports that crack Saigon airborne troops that have been clearing territory southwest of Da Nang will soon be moved to the now all-important III Corps area around Saigon. Further erosion along the strategic ridge-lines that overlook Route 1 in stretches of the northern provinces is to be expected.

The heartland is the coast, or much of it, the provinces around Saigon—thickly settled in many places with one-time refugees who came out of North Vietnam in 1954—and, above all, the Mekong Delta, where more than a third of the country's 19.5 million people live.

Vo Nguyen Giap, the ailing architect of the Dien Bien Phu victory whose theoretical writings are not yet finished, once said that he who controls the Central Highlands holds the key to the control of Indochina.