

# Hanoi Thrust to Bisect South Vietnam Expected

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North Vietnamese forces, continuing to occupy territory in the Central Highlands abandoned by retreating South Vietnamese troops, have entered what United States military sources regard as the second phase of an offensive designed to cut South Vietnam in half.

The American sources said that the North Vietnamese forces were moving toward South Vietnam's seacoast yesterday.

The South Vietnamese command has identified elements of 15 North Vietnamese divisions in the fighting, which Pentagon sources said was now a conventional war in which guerrilla and local forces are playing little or no part.

South Vietnamese forces recently engaged around the important highland city of Ban Me Thuot were reported to have fallen back to within 60 miles of the seacoast, apparently in an effort to hold Route 1, the main road to the north.

By occupying the Central Highlands, the northern forces have taken possession of Route

14, the inland highway north and the city of Pleiku where Route 19, an east-west artery, crosses 14. The United States view, therefore, is that for the moment the North holds the strategically important communications over which it can launch a general drive to the coast.

This drive is likely to focus on three towns on Route 1—Ninh Hoa to the south, Tuy Hoa in the center and Qui Nhon just south of the junction of Routes 19 and 1.

A successful northern drive to the coast would be a serious but not necessarily fatal blow to Saigon's plans to conduct an active defense in its northern provinces, these sources said. They pointed out that the South Vietnamese now have sufficient transport aircraft and ships to resupply and reinforce their troops in those provinces.

The North's switch from guerrilla to conventional warfare may be to the South's advantage in the long run, the

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Pentagon sources said. The South Vietnamese Army was trained and equipped for mechanized mobile warfare by the United States, and the view of American officers who served with the southern forces is that they are more efficient in conventional warfare than the North and that this was demonstrated during the brief period of conventional warfare in 1972.

The advantage to the South from a shift to more conventional warfare may be balanced, however, by the psychological impact upon the army and the Government of the loss of the Central Highlands. While there are efforts in Washington to discount the importance of the highlands, junior officers familiar with the country emphasize that the Vietnamese themselves accept the old belief that the power holding the highlands holds Vietnam.

Those sources, considering the North's future military options, speculated that once the northern forces were established in strength across the waist of South Vietnam and controlled the major highways,

they would switch the weight of their attacks to the northern provinces.

The sources believed that conventional forces would be directed on the northern cities of Hue and Da Nang, while Saigon and the surrounding area would be subjected to harassing attacks.

#### Weather Favors North

"Of course, this is speculation," one source said. "It could change and they may develop a major drive on Saigon itself, if they can maintain the momentum of the last few days."

The weather favors the North's offensive. Sources said that April was the best military-campaigning month in Vietnam.

Southern resupply and reinforcement of its northern positions by sea and air could be more than balanced by the North's ability to reinforce directly from North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, according to a senior official, now have about 300,000 men in the south with supplies sufficient to fight at the present level for 18 months.

The military rationale for the South's withdrawal from the three highland provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Darlac is that Saigon took a calculated risk, trading territory for time in which to amass supplies and prepare an effective defense in the north and around Saigon and in the Mekong River delta.

When the North's offensive began in the Central Highlands, the South's commanders found that their military resources were insufficient both to hold the highlands and conduct an effective defense of more populated and economically important areas.

#### South's Helicopters Curbed

Acute shortages developed, Washington sources said, in spare parts, gasoline, oil, lubricants and ammunition. The scarcity of the first four items forced a drastic curtailment of flights by the Cobra and Chinook helicopters on which the supply and reinforcement, and, in many cases, the ground

support of Saigon's forces in the highlands depended.

Without helicopters, the South Vietnamese forces lost both the logistical support and mobility necessary for an active defense, the Pentagon sources pointed out.

The withdrawal from the highlands reportedly involved considerable losses in planes and helicopters that could not be flown out because of the shortage of spare parts.

The South's strategic options are obvious and difficult. At the present level of supplies, Saigon must adopt an almost entirely defensive strategy, avoiding major encounters until its resources, especially in ammunition, have been replenished.

The movement of southern forces to defensive positions is bound to be impeded, sources said, by the flood of refugees flowing southward from the Central Highlands and the coastal towns and cities. There is some reason to believe that the Hanoi command allowed and even encouraged refugees to leave, counting on the disruption their passage would cause on the South's remaining highways.

These are familiar tactics. The Germans drove refugees onto roads selected for military traffic in Belgium and France in 1940 and the Soviet drive westward in 1944 was preceded by hundred of thou-

sands of German and Polish refugees who impeded the Nazi defense.

A slackening of the velocity of attack is unlikely once the North Vietnamese have completed gaining control, if they do, of the waist of South Vietnam and the area's communications. Qualified United States military sources believe that the North Vietnamese high command will take advantage of the good season and drive for further victories before the weather breaks in the spring.