

Gen. Brown Calls Aid Cut A Key to Saigon Pullback

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WASHINGTON, March 19—Gen. George S. Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said today that South Vietnamese “backs are against the wall” partly because of the lack of military aid from the United States.

General Brown said Saigon was being “forced into an increasingly defensive position in the face of the current major series of attacks by the North Vietnamese” unless the United States provided more aid.

“The principal difficulty of the South Vietnamese armed forces today is the lack of support,” he said in a speech prepared for delivery before a Navy League meeting in San Diego. A copy of the speech was made available here by the Pentagon.

The speech reflected a new effort to link the withdrawal of Saigon forces from the Central Highlands to Congressional cutbacks in military aid. For the present fiscal year, ending June 30, Congress originally provided \$700-million, half the amount requested. The Administration has now asked Congress to provide \$300-million additional for the last three months of the fiscal year.

Because of the cutbacks,

General Brown said, aid has been limited largely to ammunition and fuel. The United States, he said, has not replaced losses in aircraft, tanks or armored personnel carriers. For lack of spare parts and maintenance, he continued, Saigon has not been able to keep large numbers of trans-

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port aircraft and helicopters in the air.

As a consequence, he said, district capitals are falling to the Communists and Saigon must “make the tough decision which province capitals can still be saved.”

“How can we now terminate our aid and leave these people helpless in the face of this Communist offensive?” he said.

“To cut off aid now would be viewed by much of the world as a fundamental lack of resolve on our part—or even worse, a suggestion that aggression pays.”

President Is Concerned

The White House press secretary, Ron Nessen, said President Ford was watching developments in South Vietnam “closely and with considerable concern.”

Mr. Nessen said the President believed the additional aid was urgently needed. Without the aid, he said, Saigon is forced to conserve ammunition and the United States is unable to replace damaged weapons.

At the State Department, Robert Funseth, a spokesman, said one of the considerations in Saigon’s decision to withdraw from the highlands was “the reduction of air and ground mobility as a result of the inadequate level of United States military aid.”



Associated Press.

Gen. George S. Brown

Mr. Funseth said Saigon also “took into account the necessity to conserve dwindling ammunition and other supplies in the face of the Communist offensive.”

Defense Department officials have maintained that the \$700-million level of aid was barely adequate to meet ammunition needs so long as North Vietnam did not undertake a major offensive. The \$300-million in additional aid was intended to build up reserves so Saigon

would be in a position to meet an offensive next year.

Despite the retreat from the Central Highlands, it remained the assessment of defense officials that North Vietnam was not intent on conducting an all-out offensive this year. It was believed that the objective was to chip away at rural areas, avoiding contact with the main

Defense officials acknowledged that there were two major question marks now hanging over this confident assessment.

One is the psychological state of Saigon’s forces after the withdrawal from the highlands. The other is the possible movement of divisions that Hanoi has been holding in reserve in North Vietnam.

There are inconclusive indications that North Vietnam has begun to move elements of two divisions — the 316th and the 341st — into South Vietnam. American and South Vietnamese analysts differ over whether the movement represents preparation for a major offensive.

The Americans believe that the divisions are to be used to reinforce North Vietnam’s position in the northern part of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese believe that North Vietnam was intent on moving at least one of the divisions farther south.

The Pentagon view is that

Saigon had made a sound strategic decision in withdrawing from the highlands and regrouping in a more defensive, flexible position. The Pentagon believes that Saigon’s defenses are not unraveling and that so long as its forces do not fall apart psychologically, they should be able to hold their own.