

Focus of Hanoi's Offensive Has Shifted to

SAIGON DEFENSES NOW ARE STRESSED

MAR 20 1975

Thieu Regime Reported to
Be Building Perimeter to
Shield Capital and Delta

NYTimes

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The focus of North Vietnam's offensive in South Vietnam has switched to the southern part of the country, and United States military sources said yesterday that Saigon's forces appeared to be establishing a perimeter defense to shield the capital and the rich Mekong delta.

The pace of the North Vietnamese advance seemed to be such, however, that it may outstrip South Vietnamese efforts to build an effective defense. North Vietnamese units were reported in action near Xuan Loc, the capital of Long Khanh Province, less than 50 miles from Saigon.

The Saigon Government's strategy of cutting commitments in northern part of South Vietnam and concentrating on the defense of the South was reflected in reports that the northernmost Provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, were being abandoned. Hue, the country's former capital in Thua Thien is expected by American sources to be surrendered, but they believe the Government will attempt to hold Da Nang farther south on the coast.

Pullback Called 'Prudent'

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the former American commander in Vietnam, called the withdrawals by Saigon Government forces a "prudent action."

The Saigon high command, he said in a telephone interview, "cannot gamble" on holding northern outposts in view of the present shortages of supplies, especially ammunition and spare parts, and uncertainty over American Congressional action on future military aid.

THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 1975

the Southern Section of

South Vietnam

General Westmoreland said that since the Vietnam cease-fire accord was signed in Paris in January, 1973, the Soviet Union had doubled shipments of equipment to North Vietnam. He said the number of tanks deployed by the Communists was now triple what it was in 1972.

Within a week, North Vietnam has won control of the three provinces in the Central Highlands and it is now gaining control of Quang Tri Province and most of Thua Thien. It is also strengthening its position in Phuoc Long, which Communist forces captured in January.

The Saigon strategy appears to be to abandon the two northernmost military regions—I and II—so as to defend III, where the capital is, and IV, the area of the Mekong Delta.

As United States military sources see the Saigon strategy, the first objective is to assemble sizable armored, infantry and artillery formations in the area north and west of Saigon.

Air Support Important

These forces would have two advantages of being close to the main supply depots around the capital and of having the support of the South Vietnamese Air Force.

South Vietnamese strike aircraft, it was pointed out, would not be fighting at extreme range and thus would be able to economize on fuel. A shortage of gasoline, oil and lubricants for helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft was said to be one of the reasons why President Nguyen Van Thieu and his advisers

judged the northern outposts were indefensible.

The unknown element in this strategy is the morale of the South Vietnamese forces.

A Pentagon source said that this was being watched "very, very closely" and thus far there had been not sign of a break in morale among the forces around Saigon.

He and other sources said they regarded sufficient supplies, particularly ammunition, and favorable action by Congress on military aid to South Vietnam as key factors in maintaining Saigon's morale for the coming battles.

Some said they feared that further sudden reverses for Saigon might lead to the disintegration of effective opposition.

Artillery a Major Factor

With the North Vietnamese apparently now committed to fighting a conventional campaign with tanks, surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles and an unusual amount of medium artillery, American officers said they believed that Saigon's forces were as well armed in these weapons as the North and that their command and control procedures for large units were better. The American officers said also that they thought Saigon forces, fighting on ground of their own choosing and with adequate supplies, could inflict heavy losses on the invaders.

One peculiar aspect of the fighting thus far, it was noted, has been the absence of the North Vietnamese Air Force. North Vietnam's MIG-19 and MIG-21 interceptor aircraft and its fighter-bomber squadrons, may be employed, one American source said, if the South Vietnamese offer an effective defense in the South.

The Communist forces that took Ban Me Thuot in the

southern highlands are believed to be leading a drive south and southwest toward Saigon. On Tuesday, Route 20 between Dala and Saigon was cut at Dinh Quan about 70 miles from the capital and civilians were evacuated from Delat by air.

Dinh Quan was heavily shelled yesterday, and one report said 1,000 rounds fell on the city. Hoai Duc in the same area was under intermittent artillery fire, American officers said.

The northern forces in this area probably have pushed on to Xuan Loc. There are no reliable reports in Washington of the strength of these forces.

Sporadic Fighting in Highlands

Fighting in the Central Highlands and the northern region was described as sporadic.

The offensive in the northern part of South Vietnam reportedly suffered a check at Quang Tri where reliable Saigon units holding a strongly fortified position were said to have rebuffed initial attacks. According to American estimates, the defenders are not strong enough to resist a general offensive.

The prospects of holding

open Route I, the main coastal road, are believed to be remote. Long stretches of the road run between the sea and high ground from which Communist artillery can sweep the highway.

Four Communist infantry divisions have been identified in the Central Highlands and in the area to the north. The 968th Division is said to be in the Pleiku area, the 320th and 316th are farther south and the newly arrived 341st Division is reported moving on Quang Tri city from Dong Ha. Saigon spokesmen report that the scattered South Vietnamese forces in the area are outnumbered two to one.

Disaster Relief for Kentucky

WASHINGTON, March 19 (AP)—President Ford declared an emergency for Kentucky today to make available Federal funds to aid families that lost their homes as a result of high winds that struck there on March 7. The President's action will release Federal funds to provide for temporary housing and other relief measures in specific areas of the state.