

Growing Toll Of Lost Viet Provinces

Saigon

Communist troops tightened their grasp on eight abandoned provinces in South Vietnam yesterday.

Military sources said five other provinces are under heavy Communist pressure and in danger of collapse.

Perhaps as many as a million troops and refugees were fleeing from the surrendered areas.

Field reports said Communist forces opened fire on one refugee column fleeing Cheo Reo, capital of Phu Bon province 240 miles northeast of Saigon.

There was no word of casualties in the attack, in apparent violation of a presumably secret guarantee of safe passage.

The gunfire split the refugee column into three segments and thousands of refugees fled into surrounding

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hills of the Central Highlands.

The Viet Cong raised their flag over Cheo Reo after the city of 40,000 persons was evacuated.

Military sources said Communist tanks in Quang Tri province on the North Vietnam border turned on their headlights after routing a contingent of South Vietnamese Marines so the retreating troops could find their way at night.

Diplomatic and military sources said they believed South Vietnam and the Communists negotiated a secret agreement, without the knowledge of the United

States, to grant safe passage to retreating soldiers and civilians in exchange for surrender of the provinces.

Military sources listed the five new provinces in danger of falling as Tay Ninh, 50 miles northwest of Saigon; Quang Ngai, 318 miles northeast of the capital; and Lam Dong, Quang Duc, and Tuyen Duc, 60 to 150 miles northeast of Saigon.

Refugees began pouring out of Tuyen Duc's provincial capital of Dalat Wednesday, but military officials said the government has not yet given up that province.

The eight of South Vietnam's 44 provinces that have been abandoned or are

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in the process of evacuation are Darlac, Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Long, Phu Bon, Quang Tri, Phuoc Long and Thua Thiem, whose capital is the ancient capital of Hue.

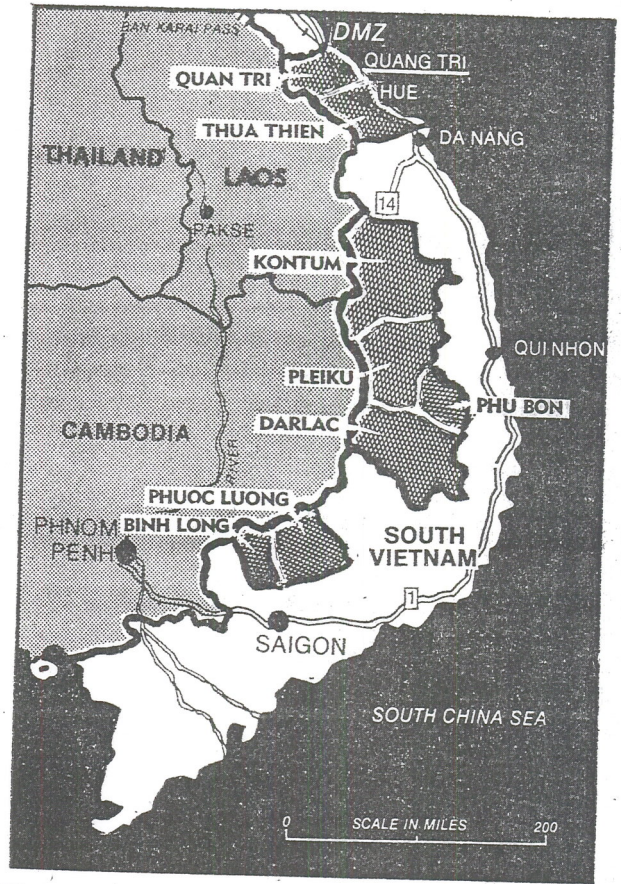
Phuoc Long fell last January, and the rest were abandoned after a fierce Communist offensive in the Central Highlands that began March 10.

The latest province to fall was Binh Long, 60 miles north of Saigon on the border of Phuoc Long. Its provincial capital, An Loc, withstood a six-month Communist siege in the 1960s and held out despite a bombardment of 600 shells a day.

The loss of Hue was a stunning psychological blow to the Vietnamese nation, which considered the old capital an intellectual and cultural keystone.

The city was seized by the Communists in the 1968 Tet offensive but recaptured after a fierce struggle.

Its residents fled south to Da Nang in cars, trucks, buses and some by sea in fishing boats and sampans.



The shaded areas from Quang Tri in the north to Binh Long show the lost provinces

Seven Americans in Hue have been evacuated, U.S. embassy sources said. One American is missing.

South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu in a national radio address yesterday afternoon appealed to the population to remain calm and said, "We will never allow the Communist aggressors to annex our beloved free South Vietnam."

The message was taped before the loss of the northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien.

Saigon authorities tightened the curfew, moving the start back from midnight to 10 p.m.

United Press