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9th province falls in Vietnam sweep

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SAIGON — Communist tanks and troops captured another district capital yesterday in their drive to swallow all of Vietnam. The advance forced South Vietnamese troops to evacuate a provincial capital 110 miles north of Saigon and then abandon the whole province.

The fall of Quang Duc province gave the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong command of a huge swath of territory from Kontum in the northern highlands 200 miles southward through Phuoc Long province and to within 50 miles of Saigon. It was the ninth province to fall to Communist forces.

From this springboard they could launch a drive eastward to the South China Sea, a decades-old strategy for slicing South Vietnam in half.

The battle losses sent more ragged refugees by the tens of thousands into a pitiful stream that has swollen to nearly 1½ million persons in flight for their lives. Heavy fighting prevented villagers fleeing the Central Highlands from reaching the safety of a coastal enclave.

Saigon newspaperman Nguyen Tuc, traveling with refugees from the Central Highlands in what he called "the convoy of tears," reported rebel Montagnard mountain tribesmen opened fire with rockets and rifles while Communist artillery struck from all directions.

Field reports said civil servants were evacuated from Quang Duc before the final assault.

To the north of Quang Duc, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces closed in from three sides on the old capital of Hue.