Danang Reported Captured

End Appears Near

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SAIGON, March 29—After 21 years, a million dead and a devastating impact on life and thought here and across the seas, the second Indochina war seems to be lurching toward its end.

With a speed that has astounded nearly everyone, South Vietnamese forces have lost or ceded nearly all the provincial capitals and government strong points of the coastal north as well as the Central Highlands in just three weeks.

News Analysis

The losses in population, territory and military personnel and equipment —grave as they are—are less astonishing than the process that has brought them about. Few major battles have been fought. Government armies were not defeated so much as they were withdrawn or simply fell apart.

While North Vietnamese forces have displayed a formidable array of freshly infiltrated troops and new heavy weapons—all in violation of the 1973 Paris agreement—it is clear that their recent victories have been won more in the minds of men than on the field of battle.

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As of today, there is no indication of a stopping point. But unless the government of President Thieu —or somebody else—can quickly rally the forces and pull the country together, an unraveling through the rest of South Vietnam is likely.

It is foolhardy to speculate how long this final stage might take. After so many years of maddening sameness, the Vietnam drama has begun to resemble a newsreel run at double, triple and quadruple speeds. One day's events cannot be recorded — or even comprehended—before being superseded and overwhelmed by another set.

Limiting the list to provincial capitals alone, in the past 16 days these collapses have befallen South Vietnam.

March 13—Fall of Banmethuot (Central Highlands).

March 16—Government withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum (Central Highlands).

March 18—Fall of Anloc (border area, north of Saigon) and Haubon (Central Highlands).

March 19—Fall of Quantri (northern front).

March 22—Fall of Gianghia (Central Highlands).

March 24—Fall of Tamky and Quangngai (northern coast).

March 26—Fall of Hue.

March 28—Fall of Hoian (northern coast) and Baoloc (lower Central Highlands).

Today, there is clear and present danger to Danang, the country's second-largest city, which is jammed with an estimated 50,000 government soldiers and more than 300,000 civilian refugees. The city is reported in chaos.

Including one lost in January, 12 of South Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals are in Communist hands and several others are in danger of immediate collapse. Administrative control of more than half the country's land area, normally inhabited by more than 3 million people, has been lost.

Of the 13 South Vietnamese main-force divisions, at least five have suffered severe losses of men and materiel in the current drive. The replacement cost of the equipment and supplies lost in the sudden withdrawal from a single city—Pleiku—is estimated by an informed source to exceed $300 million, the total amount of the much-debated Vietnam supplemental appropriation proposed by the Ford Administration.

Militarily, the dimensions of the recent reverses are enormous. North Vietnamese forces have gained nearly unchallenged ability to mass and maneuver in much of the country, using convenient approach routes to populous coastal cities, including Saigon.

Unlike previous offensives, the Communist gains—and government losses—appear to be irreversible. The Saigon government has neither the muscle nor the great-power backing to undertake such an effort with a serious chance of success.

Politically, the potential for disaster is even greater. The erosion of will and the growth of panic can make battalions vanish overnight, no matter how well-staffed or well-equipped. The fall of China in 1949, when the Nationalists were completely defeated even though 4 million troops remained, is much in the minds and sometimes on the lips of Vietnamese and foreign observers here.

The heart of the problem is that for the first time in the era of large-scale battle, the South Vietnamese are fighting alone. The United States is not beside them and—so they sense—may not even be behind them in a time of turmoil and danger.

Their adversaries boast the powerful assistance of the two great powers of the Communist world. The United States, since the signing of the Paris agreement of January 1973 and particularly since the return of American prisoners of war, has steadily cut back its material and moral support for, even interest in, the Indochina conflict.

Many Vietnamese are convinced that the Paris agreement was simply a diplomatic cover for U.S. withdrawal from the war, regardless of whether the agreement was respected. An increasing number are privately and even publicly bitter about the United States, believing that the U.S. expenditure of manpower and resources was undertaken for "great-power" reasons without consideration for the devastating impact on the Vietnamese.

A Cabinet minister sitting in his office in an old French villa said, I "was reading the Paris agreement just a few minutes ago and I noticed that the parts concerning the United States had been kept—you got your troops out and prisoners back—but Vietnam hasn't received its share.

"The cease-fire, Demilitarized Zone and the rest have been ignored. We never believed that the Paris agreement would be violated so much—not just one province or so, but a huge offensive. And yet the outside world is almost silent."

Tran Van Do, chief South Vietnamese delegate to the 1954 Geneva conference and foreign minister during the Nguyen Cao Ky government, wrote in a prominent Saigon daily this week under the heading, "Who Can Still Believe in the United States?"

Do argued that the million or more new refugees from war are victims of the promises of five American Presidents and the signature of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger on the Paris agreement. If the United States "abandons" Vietnam, "that means the 'honorable way out' of the Paris agreement was just a surrender by the Americans," he wrote.

The feeling against the United States has become explosive among a few defeated, bitter soldiers in central and northern areas who hold America responsible for their plight. It might have become more generally explosive except that the United States is still considered the last resort. The government and many people still have not given up hope for some form of American assistance. If this hope is finally dashed, the consequences could become even more dramatic than those of recent weeks.

Given the extremity of the present situation and the speed of its deterioration, it is questionable whether any action by an outside power would be sufficient to reverse the tide.

More than 550,000 United States and South Korean troops were on duty in South Vietnam during the Tet offensive of 1968, and despite enormous firepower and mobility the military decision was close in many areas.

During the 1972 Communist offensive, the United States employed massive airpower throughout Indochina, including the bombing of Hanoi and mining of Haiphong harber. This was a political and psychological blow to the North Vietnamese because neither the Soviet Union nor China lifted a finger to oppose the U.S. action.

The present North Vietnamese blitzkrieg, which is described as involving at least 19 divisions armed with a profusion of weapons, has achieved military as well as political successes of a far more lasting nature than the other two offensives. In the sense of some new and unforeseen factor, there seems to be little hope that the present offensive can be any but the final military drive of the war.