

Communist Threat on Da Nang Evacuation



AP Wirephoto

A hastily assembled gangplank, fashioned of boards, was used to help debark refugees from Da Nang from a merchant ship at Cam Ranh Bay yesterday

Reds Push Along the Coast

Saigon

Communist forces occupied Da Nang in triumph today and warned that all ships and planes must have their permission before evacuating refugees from the city, their greatest trophy in 20 years of Indo-China war.

The fall of Da Nang left them in control of 50 per cent of South Vietnam's land area and fighting for another 25 per cent after three weeks of renewed fighting.

The next objective of the advancing Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops appeared to be coastal Qui Nhon, 250 miles northwest of Saigon.

North Vietnamese broadcasts condemned the evacuation as a "brazen provocation"

In Saigon, the Viet Cong Provisional Revolutionary Government said "all boats and planes, from whatever country, must ask permission before entering our territorial waters."

President Ford, who had ordered U.S. Navy vessels to help evacuate refugees from Da Nang just hours be-

COMMUNIST WARNING

fore the city fell yesterday, termed the loss "an immense human tragedy." He is on Easter vacation in Palm Springs and his press secretary, Ron Nessen, said: "It is the President's desire that this evacuation go forward."

A Pentagon spokesman said in Washington that two American Navy amphibious craft would arrive off the South Vietnamese coast early today, but he gave no specific location. He said the vessels "will stand by in international waters offshore and await orders. What they will do will depend on the situation at the time."

The spokesman also said there were reports that the South Vietnamese were evacuating some of the estimated 100,000 military personnel trapped by the sudden capitulation of Da Nang. He said the evacuation possibly involved Vietnamese

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marines who were boarding ships in the Marble Mountain area just north of Da Nang that was once a large U.S. helicopter base beside the South China Sea.

It appeared that the U.S. evacuation ships could anchor off Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and other central ports that also are crowded with refugees and threatened by the North Vietnamese-Viet Cong offensive.

Fighting was reported near Qui Nhon, South Vietnam's third largest city with more than 200,000 persons. It is 175 miles south of Da Nang and was once a major supply port for U.S. army units. It was defended by two South Korean army divisions that withdrew from South Vietnam after truce papers were signed two years ago.

Demoralized government forces offered little resistance.

Eventually, the North Vietnamese should be able to mount a major push in the Third Military Region that includes Saigon and 11 surrounding provinces. There are already five North Vietnamese divisions poised to attack Tay Ninh province northwest of Saigon and

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Long Khanh and Binh Tuy provinces to the east.

Informed sources believe a major Communist-led assault against Saigon could not be adequately resisted. They say that President Nguyen Van Thieu's power base is also eroding quickly and that political changes could swiftly follow more North Vietnamese successes.

As many as ten million civilians, half of South Vietnam's civilian population, were either under control of the Communist side, living in contested areas or on the run. An estimated 100,000 troops — ten per cent of the total military force — were reported lost as a result of the fall of Da Nang and Hue before it.

Millions of dollars worth of military equipment were left behind, reportedly including the equipment of a full air division at Da Nang.

In Saigon this morning, an army command spokesman said Brigadier General Nguyen Van Diem, commander of the government's shattered 1st Division, and

14 other persons were killed when their helicopter ran out of fuel and crashed in Binh Dinh province over the weekend.

The chopper, carrying Diem's family and several officers, crashed at Bong Son, 285 miles north of Saigon. There was only one survivor, a colonel who was critically injured, the spokesman said.

Reaction in Saigon political circles to the fall of Da Nang was bitter. Much of the criticism centered on the failure to defend the city despite the reported presence of about 100,000 troops.

"Da Nang fell because there was a complete loss of leadership, order and morale," said opposition deputy Ly Qui Chung. He added that if Thieu stays in power "nothing is going to change and such disasters will continue all the way to Saigon."

Only last Wednesday, after the fall of Hue, Thieu pledged that he was drawing the line at Da Nang, that there would be no further retreat and government troops would "fight to death if necessary" to hold Da Nang. He had made the same pledge at Hue.

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