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Foe's Sudden Gains Stun Saigon

By MALCOLM W. BROWNE
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 30—A major question here today was how Vietnamese Communist forces could accomplish in three weeks, almost effortlessly, what had been far beyond their reach for a quarter of a century.

This question is expected to occupy military and political analysts in the months and years ahead. For the moment, however, leaders here seemed too preoccupied with the fate of Saigon itself in the next days and weeks to do much analyzing.

The gains of the Communists in the last three weeks have been far greater than the worst possibilities envisioned by the Saigon leaders and their American allies.

However, there seems to be general agreement that the North Vietnamese have been successful not because of overwhelming power but because of

the collapse of Saigon's forces in about two-thirds of the country, and their lack of will to fight.

Even those American officials who believed consistently over the years in an ultimate victory over the Communists are suddenly letting it be known that they feel defeat is at hand.

In Saigon, very few officials of any nationality will say that a non-Communist government can survive much longer. Nonetheless, about a million South Vietnamese are still under Government arms, Saigon still has one of the largest air forces in the world, and there appears

to be ample ammunition and equipment to carry on a war.

Until the first week of March, there had been little indication of what was impending, despite reports that fresh North Vietnamese divisions were moving south.

But then, abruptly, Communist forces began sweeping over outposts in the sparsely populated Central Highlands.

Such attacks had occurred in the highlands before, in 1961, 1963, 1965, 1968 and 1972. Invariably, Communist units had overrun many outposts, usually to be repelled later. However, never had they captured any provincial capitals in the highlands. The assumption was that Saigon, once more, could handle the situation.

Then, at 3 A.M. March 10, the attack began on Ban Me Thuot, capital of Dar Lac Province, 150 miles northeast of Saigon. The town is the un-

Continued on Page 14, Column 1

NEWS INDEX

	Page		Page
About New York	37	Movies	37-41
Books	29	Music	37-41
Bridge	28	Obituaries	34
Business	52	Sports	44-48
Crossword	29	Theaters	37-41
Editorials	30	Transportation	54
Family/Style	42-43	TV and Radio	55
Financial	49-51	U.N. Proceedings	3
Letters	30	Weather	54

News Summary and Index, Page 33

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

official capital of the montagnard tribal region dominated by the Rhade and Jarai, two of the most advanced of all the mountain tribes of Vietnam, and long hostile to the ethnic Vietnamese.

Because the jungle-covered highlands had afforded excellent cover for Communist guerrillas and supplies infiltrating the country from Laos, the United States had long been concerned about the area. When the United States began taking an active interest in events in Vietnam in the nineteen-sixties, special attention was focused on the highlands and the establishment of friendship with the montagnards.

The Danger Appears

Whether the absence of Americans made a difference in the March 10 attack on Ban Me Thuot is disputed. But Ban Me Thuot, which had never been in danger of falling to the Communists before, was securely in Communist hands this time in less than three days. The Communists reportedly met almost no resistance, and most of the Government troops remained in the town with them.

It was immediately clear that the whole highlands—especially the provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Dar Lac—was in grave danger of being lost to the Government.

Up to that time President Nguyen Van Thieu had insisted adamantly that his Government would never willingly cede any territory but would fight to the death to hold what was under Government control or regain what had been lost.

But the fall of Ban Me Thuot reportedly affected President Thieu deeply. From that point on, he seemed to be isolating himself from aides and advisers, to be making sweeping decisions entirely on his own, and to be issuing orders without explanation.

Mr. Thieu ordered the arrest of dissident civilians who, he said, had been plotting against his administration. The validity of the charges aside, Western diplomats and informed Vietnamese began speaking of a crisis of leadership that, if not corrected, could lead to the swift collapse of the country. It is clear that up to now, the problem has not been handled.

Meanwhile, awareness that the American Congress seemed about ready to end military aid to Vietnam made it starkly clear here that a new North Vietnamese offensive would not bring the old kind of response from Washington—the dispatching of American fighting men, B-52 bombers and so on.

The Withdrawal Decision

Informants said that on the night of March 13, President Thieu decided to abandon the Central Highlands, saving what could be saved of the army and the population and leaving scorched earth and deserted wilderness to the Communists.

According to people close to the presidential palace, about the same time or shortly afterward he extended that decision to apply to any area of northern South Vietnam that could be held only with heavy losses.

The President was reported to have made it known that commanders in the north were to prepare contingency plans to evacuate the north of population and troops, if need be, rather than hold to the last and suffer huge numbers of killed and wounded. A number of his generals and some American advisers had long urged such a policy on him as practical.

But once the word was out, the flight began.

On March 16 it became known that the command headquarters of the entire Military Region II, the Central Highlands, had been moved out of Pleiku to the coastal city of Nha Trang. With that headquarters gone, the exodus was on.

Hundreds of thousands from Kontum and Pleiku Provinces, led by Government troops who, it is understood, did not explain what was happening, gathered what belongings they could, burned their houses and took to the road.

Many Died on the March

The night skies glowed with the flames as the stream of travelers gained volume along Route 7B toward the South China Sea. Lack of food and water and the terrible hardships of the jungle told on the young and weak and many died. Among the troops, senior officers and privates alike were stunned and mystified by the order to leave a huge part of Vietnam to the enemy without even having engaged him.

Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong units moved swiftly to fill the vacuum. Pleiku and Kontum were largely destroyed and deserted by the time the Communists arrived, but in Ban Me Thuot, the provisional Revolutionary Government of the Vietcong

was holding public meetings within hours of the nearly bloodless capitulation.

The Saigon newspaper Chinh-Luan, in particular, in publishing accounts of the march from the highlands, informed the country that the army had been ordered to flee without fighting. The Government's reaction to the report was something close to indifference.

On March 20, North Vietnamese tanks and infantry in northernmost Quang-Tri Province began pushing south, cautiously to and across the My Chanh River, taking the remains of Quang Tri city, which had been destroyed in 1972.

Panic and Flight From Hue

The people then discovered that the Saigon civil administration and army were quickly and quietly leaving the city of Hue. There was panic in the one-time imperial capital. On foot, in trucks, buses, tractors, cars and bicycles, people surged down Route 1 toward the presumed safety of Da Nang. The country's second largest city seemed a bastion that might never face serious threats.

The North Vietnamese moved southeast, bypassing Hue in such a way that the city could be cut off at will. Word had spread rapidly by then that the army was in full flight in parts of the country.

Thieu's Speeches Fail

President Thieu made two brief speeches to the nation, conceding that there had been losses but urging the troops and the people to fight on. The speeches fell so far short of reasserting Saigon's control over the war and nation that many decided there was no longer any real government.

Administrative services throughout the nation, including Saigon, began to break down; there were increasing reports that military officers were no longer willing to carry out orders.

On March 22, with the nation's attention on the disaster unfolding in the north, the Communists swiftly and almost bloodlessly overran the entire province of Quang Duc, including its capital, Gia Nghia, which is little more than 100 miles northeast of Saigon. The panic in Da Lat, not far away, reached the point at which 18 airliners a day were evacuating people.



American Marines from the consulate in Da Nang carrying M-16 rifles and valises as they landed near Saigon by ship from the besieged northern city. United Press International

Reds' Flag Over Hue

The same day the Communists in the north cut the escape route from Hue, taking over most of Route 1 south of the city. Five days later the Vietcong flag was flying over the one-time imperial capital. A day earlier, Tam Ky, the provincial capital of Quang Tin Province, and Quang Ngai, capital of Quang Ngai Province, were quietly occupied by North Vietnamese infantry and tanks.

The end came for Da Nang on Easter Sunday.

The city was conquered, but in effect by Saigon's own troops, rather than the North Vietnamese. The reign of terror of Government forces in the city cost many lives and effectively kept aid from being sent in and kept refugees from getting out. The Government soldiers were prepared to kill anyone, including women and children, to escape the city. They sometimes did. But very few succeeded in getting away.

The commander of the whole northern region, Lieut. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, spent his final day on a boat off the Da Nang coast, watching helplessly as his renegade army roared through the dying city, waiting for the North Vietnamese to come in and restore order.