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Saigon Hope: Buying Time to Mount Defense of Capital

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South Vietnamese infantry and artillery are attempting to establish a line north of the coastal port of Nha Trang in an effort to halt a Communist offensive developing along the seacoast, according to United States military sources. The offensive will be accompanied, the sources predicted, by a steady intensification of pressure to test the morale of South Vietnam's forces defending the Saigon area.

Military Analysis

American officers generally believe that, despite the rout in the north, the Saigon sector can be held by the ground and air forces available there. They believe that the airlift of ammunition, fuel and spare parts to the sector's garrison will balance any weakening of morale arising from heavy losses in the north.

4 Divisions Vanish

Four of the 13 divisions and four of the independent ranger and armored brigades with which South Vietnam began the present campaign have ceased to exist as organized units, according to reports reaching Washington from Saigon.

The First Division, one regarded as one of the best in the army, has "disappeared." About 4,000 men of the Second Division are reported making their way south by ship and road. Only 6,000 men of the 13,000 in the Marine Division

have escaped capture. Two ranger brigades involved in the northern fighting have been out of contact with their headquarters for more than a week.

About 10,000 men, rangers, marines, regular infantry and the remains of the First Armored Brigade, are reported cut off by the North Vietnamese on the coast north of Hue. The prospects of exxtricating any of these forces in the face of Communist artillery are regarded as remote.

Hanoi Has More Men

These losses tip the manpower balance sharply in favor of the Communists. Allowing for battle casualties, which are regarded as light, American sources estimate that North Vietnam now has about 275,000 men deployed in South Vietnam against a maximum of 180,000 South Vietnamese regulars, rangers, and militia.

The defensive strategy emerging from Saigon's chaotic situation, as American analysts see it, appears to focus on a build-up of the forces, fixed defenses and supplies around Saigon while a holding action is fought to check the coastal sweep.

Gen. Pham Van Phu, commanding Military Region II, was reported to have told Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, the Army Chief of Staff, who is in Vietnam to assess the situation, that he intends to fight on a line north of Nha Trang, the port 185 miles northeast of Saigon.

The mission of the holding

force, which was under heavy artillery fire yesterday, is believed to be a defensive action that will win time for the completion of the arrangements being made around Saigon for the defense of the capital area.

Similar actions, American sources conceded, have failed further north. They thought that both Qui Nhon and Tuy Hoa north of Nha Trang would be taken by the Communist forces moving toward the two coastal cities. They emphasized, however, that the holding action north of Nha Trang would be on a larger scale, using relatively unshaken troops.

The danger to South Vietnam in this sector is that a northern breakthrough would open the way for a drive southward by thousands of infantrymen, supported by tanks, down Route 1 to link up with the forces now assembling in the Saigon area.

Pressure Mounts

Pressure in the Saigon sector continues to mount, Defense Department sources said. South Vietnamese intelligence estimates that there already are five northern divisions in the Saigon area including 200 tanks around Tay Ninh.

The present estimate of the Saigon command is that its forces could offer "adequate offensive. American sources are inclined to agree; the consensus is that Saigon can be held on two conditions.

The first is that the military supplies promised by the United States begin to arrive in quantities sufficient for the effect

to be felt in frontline rifle companies, artillery batteries and fighter squadrons.

The effective defense of Saigon is possible, these sources maintained, only if the defenders have very large quantities of ammunition of all kinds. A battle for the capital is likely to last for months and some officers thought that, ultimately, the outcome would depend on a continuous airlift of American supplies.

Spare Parts Vital

Spare parts are regarded as equally important. A high number of aircraft, tanks and armored personnel carriers will remain out of action until spare parts are received and installed.

The second condition is morale. American sources hope that any southern forces escaping from the north will not infect the Saigon garrison with the panic that apparently swept through many units. Such troops, they believe, should be rearmed and reindoctrinated before being sent to the front.

American military supplies should begin to arrive this week, the sources estimated. They believed that the supplies themselves would be a morale builder but they emphasized that the principal burden lay on the South Vietnamese commanders.

"Someone has to tell the troops that this is it," said one officer with long experience in Vietnam. "They've got to realize that if there are any miracles, they'll have to perform them, that, although we're sending supplies, it's their battle."