

Coastal Forces Unable To Reach Saigon Sector

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The development of Communist attacks from the north and east of Saigon and the inability of units from the coastal cities to reach the perimeter around the capital have raised doubts

in the Defense Department over military prospects of the defense of Saigon.

Military Analysis

Pentagon sources said they were concerned over the Saigon forces' ability to establish a defensive position along a line from the Parrot's Beak on the Cambodian border to the sea. The line would run east of Bien Hoa, already under artillery fire, and through Long Thanh.

Saigon's plans to fight on this line were made on the assumption that units from the north would arrive within the perimeter in sufficient strength to reinforce the present Saigon garrison.

The core of the Saigon defense is three infantry divisions, the Fifth, the 18th and the 25th, supported by at least one tank battalion, some armored cavalry squadrons and an undisclosed number of ranger battalions. In numbers and firepower this force is regarded as inferior to the six Communist divisions, accompanied by about 200 T-54 tanks.

Reinforcement Doubted

The Saigon command's original plan counted on the reinforcement of these troops by units falling back from the north. The prospects of any effective reinforcement by these troops are now regarded as remote.

The South Vietnamese navy did evacuate some troops of the 22d Division from Qui Nhon yesterday. Soldiers of other units are making their way south in small groups. But these are not considered combat-ready reinforcements.

In the last 24 hours, two developments have all but destroyed the hopes reposed in this plan.

The Communists have opened what is interpreted as a major attack at Chon Thanh, 45 miles north of Saigon.

The attackers were met by the 25th Division and some ranger battalions. Saigon spokesmen reported that the initial attack had been driven off, but the expectation in United States military circles is that if they have been repulsed, the Communists will

forces have persuaded the Communists that Saigon's defense would disintegrate under a major attack.

The only area that could provide fresh troops for the defense of the capital is the delta. But the government forces there are likely to be pinned down by the Communist operations in Dinh Tuong Province and their reportedly low stocks of ammunition raise doubts about their value as reinforcements.

American analysts report that some units in the Saigon area, particularly the Fifth and 25th divisions, have been fighting well. But they doubt that the sector can be held by two or even three effective divisions.

The deteriorating situation will be discussed by Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, the Army Chief of Staff, when he returns from Saigon and meets with President Ford next weekend.

A lone note of optimism was sounded by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, former American commander in Vietnam.

Interviewed on the CBS Morning News, the general declared that the fact that the South Vietnamese have had a "set-back doesn't mean that they are going to lose the final battle."

The Pentagon sources said not even American military supplies could be expected to influence the final outcome. A C-5A transport landed 14 105-mm. howitzers, ammunition and communications equipment in Saigon yesterday, but this materiel is unlikely, by itself, to make much difference.

Supplies Held Too Late

A supply operation begun two weeks ago, the sources said, might have raised government morale and increased the resources of the Saigon garrison. But the airlift is believed to be too little and too late.

American analysts expect Communist thrusts at coastal cities like Tuy Hoa and Cam Ranh. Some Saigon Government units have fought well around Nha Trang, they point out, but reports from that front speak of steady infiltration behind the lines of Communist combat engineers who destroy depots and communications in the rear areas.

The numerical strength of the Communists was demonstrated by their ability to mount attacks simultaneously on Qui Nhon and Nha Trang and at the same time direct a strong force of tanks and infantry against Da Lat in the southern force of tanks and infantry against Da Lat in the southern part of the Central Highlands.

Like a spring flood the Communists simply flow around isolated centers of resistance and move on to more vulnerable objectives.

move their attack to another sector.

Other Communist attacks have developed at Xuan Loc, 45 miles east of Saigon, and in Dinh Tuong Province in the Mekong Delta, southwest of the capital.

Most military sources believed that these attacks were the first moves in a general offensive. They concluded that the disorganization and poor morale of the Government