

# Main Thrust Against Saigon Expected From North

By DREW MIDDLETON

North Vietnamese attacks east and southwest of Saigon may represent the opening of an offensive in the area, according to United States military sources. The attacks at

**Military Analysis**

Xuan Loc, 38 miles east of Saigon, and near Tan An, 18 miles to the southwest, were preceded by

heavy artillery and rocket preparation.

Senior officers believe that the main attack on Saigon will be launched from the north down the Saigon River corridor. Forces in the Tay Ninh area, they suggested, may link up with the Sixth Division, if it is successful at Xuan Loc, for a drive from the north.

Some sources suggested that the current high-level discussions in Washington about military aid had led the Communists to accelerate the paces of their attacks. A more general view was that the Communists, having completed their preparations, were moving into the first phase of their offensive.

The character of the terrain on three sides of Saigon is one reason for expecting that the Communists' main thrust will develop from the north.

To the east, south and west, low-lying ground is cut by small streams feeding rice paddy or trickling into the Saigon River or the sea. The terrain was characterized by one officer as "difficult to defend and damn near impossible for a major conventional attack with tanks and self-propelled guns."

The impact of shells and bombs would break down the tiny dams in the area and shatter the banks of the streams. Forces moving toward the city would have to advance across open country, unaccompanied

by armor and would be vulnerable to air attack and to long-range artillery fire.

Of the two current Communist attacks, the one at Xuan Loc, if successful, appears to offer the greater opportunities for successful exploitation. American sources said that Communists could advance westward along a reasonably good road through heavily wooded country that provides cover against air attack.

Once at Bien Hoa, which was shelled yesterday, the Sixth Division could unite with Communist forces pushing southeast from the Tay Ninh area and form a formidable force poised to take the Saigon River corridor route south to the capital.

The character of the Xuan Loc fighting indicated that the attack was a good deal more than a reconnaissance in force. The Communists employed 2,000 rounds of artillery and mortar shells and rockets in the preliminary bombardment and expanded their infantry attacks to include strongpoints held by militia and support troops around the town.

The seizure of Xuan Loc would give the Communists more than a springboard for an attack toward Bien Hoa. Xuan Loc would also become a strongpoint in the arc of fixed positions that the Communists are drawing around Saigon from Tay Ninh to Xuan Loc.

As analysts read Communist

intentions, the next step will be movement southward from Xuan Loc to Vung Tau anchoring the left of the arc on the coast and establishing artillery positions commanding the sea entry to Saigon.

Neither the attackers' positions nor the posts taken up by the defenders should be considered as a coherent, linear front. Miles of jungle and swamp separate the forces at Tay Ninh from those at Xuan Loc or at Tan An.

The battle for Saigon will not be won or lost from the positions now achieved by the attackers, the sources emphasized. But they are necessary for the development of a final offensive.

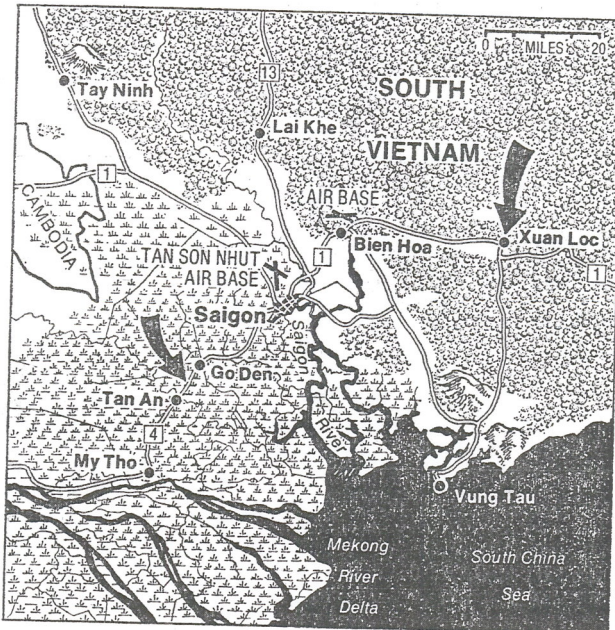
**Some Communications Cut**

For a week, Communist operations have methodically cut Saigon's communications to the east, north and west. This, the sources conceded, may sound more important from a military standpoint than is actually the case.

The Saigon divisions in the capital area, perhaps 40,000 men facing an estimated 65,000 Communists, cannot expect reinforcement from the east or the northwest.

The Government forces by now have received and re-armed all the stragglers and small units fleeing from the north that are capable of another effort. The three divisions in the Mekong Delta are occupied with an increasing number of Communist attacks and, apparently, lack the mobility to provide rapid reinforcement for the capital area's garrison.

Existing supplies are largely based in the Saigon area with some fuel, ammunition and spare parts at outlying positions like the air base at Bien Hoa. American military aid is being flown into the capital and is distributed to the forces fighting outside the city.



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Communist forces tightened their grip on Saigon's approaches by invading Xuan Loc to the northeast and by temporarily cutting a key road to the southwest. The low-lying terrain of the capital area, United States analysts say, makes defending Saigon difficult.