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Hanoi Felt Aiming to Prevent Bloodshed

By DREW MIDDLETON

The tactical pattern of the heavy fighting in South Vietnam at and near Xuan Loc in the last 48 hours indicates to United States military analysts that the North Vietnamese high command wants to destroy the defending Government divisions in the field and thus prevent them from falling back to offer a street-by-street defense of Saigon.

Military Analysis

Occupation of the capital, 38 miles southwest of Xuan Loc, is Hanoi's strategic objective. The invaders would prefer to take the city by political means, these sources said, through a capitulation arranged with a regime replacing that of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

But if there is to be a battle for Saigon, these American analysts say, the tactics of the Communists will seek to make it as bloodless as possible with perhaps only the President's personal guard of airborne troops offering serious resistance.

The tactics in the battles around Saigon concentrate primarily on pinning the defending divisions to fixed positions such as Xuan Loc by launching heavy conventional attacks. While these are being met by the Government troops, the Communists slip smaller units around the flanks to cut communications, harass supply echelons and engage what

Government reinforcements are available.

This approach is possible because the North Vietnamese, although outnumbered in the Saigon and Mekong Delta sectors, have repeatedly been able to concentrate numerically superior forces for its attacks.

Pentagon sources estimate that North Vietnam now has about 75,000 combat troops in the two sectors, where there are about 100,000 regular South Vietnamese forces along with perhaps 100,000 less well-equipped militiamen.

Saigon, however, has been unable to benefit from this reported numerical superiority.

By launching a large number of small but energetic attacks in the delta and by keeping large forces continually on the move in the area between Tay Ninh and Chon Thanh north of Saigon, the invaders have been able to tie up Government forces that might otherwise be switched to more important points.

Motor Transport Scarce

Such reinforcing movements, although possible, are daily less feasible because the defenders are short of motor transport.

The conventional battle is being fought at present at distances of 25 to 35 miles from Saigon. Meanwhile, the sources pointed out, the Communists have begun the infiltration of highly-trained small units of two or three men into Saigon. These are reported to be armed and equipped for demolition and commando operations and their role is apparently to create confusion and panic in the city.

The Communists may hope, one source said, that destruction and disorder in Saigon will intensify efforts to oust President Thieu and establish a regime prepared to surrender. In any case, he said, reports of rioting in the capital can be expected to lower the morale of troops fighting in the hinterland.

The geographical objective of the battle in and south of Xuan Loc is believed to be Bien Hoa, which is important both as a supply base for the Government divisions on the northern and eastern faces of the Saigon area and as a base for air operations.

Forces Could Join

An advance to Bien Hoa would provide the opportunity for a junction with the North Vietnamese forces north of the capital. These forces were reported to have moved eastward from the Tay Ninh area toward Chon Thanh on Route 13 north of the capital.

If the North Vietnamese are able to unite the two forces, they will be in position to launch an attack south toward

Saigon along the Saigon River corridor. American officers familiar with the area point out that this was the axis of attack followed unsuccessfully by North Vietnamese forces during the Tet offensive of 1968. The route offers the only terrain suitable for rapid mass movement around Saigon, they said.

American officers, although remaining uncertain about the long-term results of the present battles, noted some positive elements from the South Vietnamese standpoint.

South Vietnamese infantry, particularly the 18th Division and attached ranger units, fought well in the initial phases of the Xuan Loc battle, where they were faced by the elements of two North Vietnamese divisions.

Saigon fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships intervened effectively in the fighting, particularly at Trang Bom west of Xuan Loc. These aircraft, however, are believed to be based at Bien Hoa and may have to be shifted to airfields nearer Saigon if a major attack develops near their present base.

Attacks on Airfields

Much of Saigon's air effort in the last week has been devoted to attacks against airfields in the north still littered with aircraft left by the North Vietnamese forces in their retreat last month.

These attacks, sources conceded, contribute little to the immediate battle around Saigon. If successful, they will prevent the use of the captured aircraft, munitions, fuel and radar by the North Vietnamese.

To some extent, an American who served in Vietnam said, the South Vietnamese have been fighting "blind" in the present campaign. During the last major fighting in the south, in 1972, he pointed out, Vietnamization was incomplete and the Saigon forces benefited from the American Eighth Radio Research Unit, which monitored North Vietnamese military traffic and relayed Hanoi's operational orders to combat units.

In some recent instances, however, the South Vietnamese troops have had no idea of the location of the invaders until an attack developed.

Question of Reinforcements

According to Pentagon sources, there has been no obvious movement of Communist reinforcements out to the Saigon area.

"Obvious" is the operative word, one source conceded. The Government air force has flown few long-range reconnaissance flights and assessment of aerial photographs is slow and sometimes unreliable.

If as the movement is taking place, as some officers suspect, the North Vietnamese will be able to maintain the pace of their present operations, including a prodigal use of artillery and rocket fire, and assemble a numerically superior army in the Saigon area.

Should Manol mass all its forces in that area, the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, estimates that it would achieve a numerical advantage of 2½ to 1 or even 3 to 1.



South Vietnamese refugees pausing yesterday in their flight from the fighting around Xuan Loc, a key point in the defense of Saigon

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