

# Long Odds Against South Vietnam: Manpower and Weapons Deficient

4-18-75  
NYT

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After more than four weeks of fighting, the Vietnam campaign appears to United States military sources to be entering a final phase in which Saigon's hopes for preventing a defeat are minimal. The North Vietnamese divisions closing in around the capital retain the tactical initiative they seized at Ban Me Thuot in the middle of March, in this view, and the South Vietnamese have neither the manpower nor the weapons to reverse the situation.

The sources said an offensive against the city was almost certain to open before any American resupply effort—itsself dependent on Congressional sanction—and the reorganization of shattered divisions could have an impact.

The morale of the South Vietnamese combat forces in the Saigon sector, which remained high during the bitter fighting for Xuan Loc, may crack, the sources believe, once it is known that Americans are leaving and that munitions are unlikely to arrive in time.

## France in 1940

There is a curious resemblance between what is happening in South Vietnam and what happened in France in 1940. Many of the elements of that tragic period have appeared in the last month: initial military shock that destroyed the morale of many units, hundreds of thousands of refugees, the gradual physical disappearance of a once-trusted ally — Britain then, the United States now — and mounting disillusion with that ally, coupled with desperate appeals to it for arms.

Arms alone are not the answer, the military analysts concede. For two weeks Saigon's need has been trained combat units. Although both the South Vietnamese Defense Ministry and the Pentagon have emphasized the presence of 100,000 militiamen in the Saigon and Mekong River delta areas, experienced officers regard them forces as ineffective against veteran Communist divisions.

Ultimately the defense of the sprawling Saigon sector depends on about 48,000 to 50,000 regular troops. Some of the units have suffered serious casualties and all are short of equipment. In the present crippled state of the South Vietnamese Air Force, furthermore, they cannot expect effective support.

Against this garrison the North Vietnamese have concentrated 10 to 12 divisions, or 100,000 to 120,000 men. The estimate is that fewer than half have been intensively engaged, so they are fresher and probably more confident than the tired Southerners. They are also better equipped.

## A Long Request List

Reliable estimates of Southern material losses in the confused fighting of the last week are not available, but the list submitted to Congress by the Defense Department reflects the inadequacies.

South Vietnam urgently needs more than 100,000 rifles, 750 field guns, over 100 tanks, 330 armored personnel carriers, over 100 antitank missile launchers and hundreds of mortars, vehicles, radios and other items.

Some of this would be earmarked for the eight divisions Saigon is said to be frantically trying to organize out of the troops filtering in from the debacle farther north and from independent ranger units.

North Vietnam has meanwhile expanded its ascendancy in weapons. Infantry attacks are preceded by artillery and rocket barrages and accompanied by strong armored formations. Soviet-built field guns outrange most of Saigon's artillery and Soviet tanks are more than a match for older American models, although, American sources said, newer models

with 90-mm guns have fought the Soviet tanks to a standstill.

Students of North Vietnam's military thinking argue that it wants to avoid a street by street struggle for Saigon, which would be costly in casualties and destructive of property as well as marring the image of liberators that Communist propaganda has attempted to paint.

Hanoi's tactics, the military analysts said, will be to seek the destruction of Saigon's remaining forces outside the city in the expectation that capitulation will follow.

If these tactics succeed, "the whole situation will go very fast," one source commented, adding, "Collapse could come in a matter of hours, not days,

if the regular units are broken in battles on the outskirts."

The employment of the South's two waning military assets, air power and armor, in the last week of fighting were criticized by an experienced officer, who felt that fighter-bombers should have been used more often in support of the hard-pressed ground forces and that tanks should have been husbanded.

South Vietnam began the campaign with a high degree of mobility. Losses of transport, shortages of fuel and spare parts and weaknesses in maintenance reduced this advantage. At the same time the Communists deployed hundreds of Soviet-built trucks and attained unprecedented mobility.