

Saigon Apparently Braces For a Direct Thrust by Foe

APR 18 1975

NYTimes By MALCOLM W. BROWNE

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Friday, April 18 — Government troops were reported holding yesterday at Xuan Loc, 38 miles to the northeast, and making some gains nearby, but here in the capital fears grew that Saigon itself was about to come under heavy attack.

Reports circulated that 10 to 12 North Vietnamese divisions were arrayed in the Saigon region waiting for a signal to attack. Inside the city, the North Vietnamese 316th Demolition Group, which reportedly entered some time ago, was also rumored prepared for action.

Military sources said that the national army was preparing to make a last-ditch stand if necessary along the banks of the Dong Nai River adjoining the capital.

Last night loudspeaker trucks

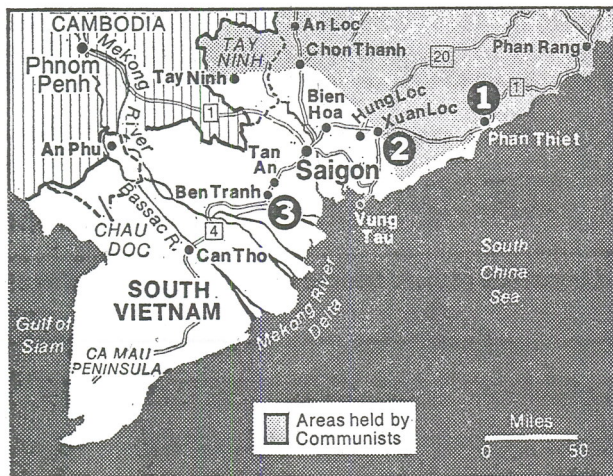
advised the residents of Saigon to return to their homes shortly before the curfew hour, 9 o'clock, to keep their doors locked and to remain calm. The official explanation was that local militiamen were holding a drill.

Reports from the devastated city of Xuan Loc, capital of Long Khanh Province, said the Government defenders were still withstanding heavy shelling and sporadic ground attacks during the day.

Of greater importance to Saigon, the Communists apparently made no further progress west of Xuan Loc. Their control extends to Route 1's intersection with Route 25, which

Continued on Page 14, Column 7

Saigon Apparently Girds For Direct Thrust by Foe



The New York Times/April 18, 1975

Phan Rang (1) was under heavy Communist attack. Xuan Loc (2) was still in Government hands, and nearby Hung Loc was retaken. Other action included clash in delta between Saigon and Communist forces at Ben Yranh (3).

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

leads more directly to Saigon than does Route 1.

Government troops, which fell back earlier in the week from some points along the approaches to Xuan Loc, succeeded in reoccupying some of the lost ground during the day with heavy tank and artillery support. They re-entered the hamlet of Hung Loc, which they had left in the face of heavy shelling.

Pressure on Phan Thiet

Meanwhile, a new blow to Saigon's forces appeared at hand at Phan Thiet, the coastal city due east of Xuan Loc. A nearly continuous barrage of shells was said to be falling into the city, Communist forces in the area presumably had ample strength to take it soon.

Earlier, the fall of Phan Rang, a city some 60 miles farther up the coast, was announced by the Saigon military spokesman. He said that Phan Rang's defenders had fallen back to positions outside the city but that prolonged resistance appeared doubtful, particularly in view of severe supply problems.

Lost with Phan Rang were its air base and a presumably substantial number of aircraft. These developments will free Communist troops to move toward Saigon, reinforcing those already in position and fresh troops reportedly moving in from the north.

In case of an attack on Saigon, the highway bridges over the adjoining Dong Nai River, leading toward Bien Hoa, would presumably be destroyed at the last moment, affording a fairly good natural barrier at least from one direction.

But questions of morale clearly appeared to be outweighing the importance of military developments or the relative size and firepower of opposing units.

The Government-supervised press and radio said last night that the United States would probably grant more aid to this country.

As for Cambodia, while some

newspapers here reported fighting inside Phnom Penh, there were no reports that the Cambodian capital had fallen or that the war in the neighboring country had ended in a Communist victory.

Neither was there any official reaction here to the fall of Cambodia, which had been expected for some time. The authorities apparently had felt the event could have a dangerous effect here on the will to continue resistance.

While the primary threat to Saigon appeared to be from the northeast, minor but draining actions were being fought over most of the Mekong River delta south of Saigon, with a dozen or so district cai under intermittent shelling.

Permanent Communist interruption of Route 4 south of Saigon would effectively isolate it from the delta, the country's principal rice-producing area. The Communist side has been applying steady pressure for two weeks to accomplish this.

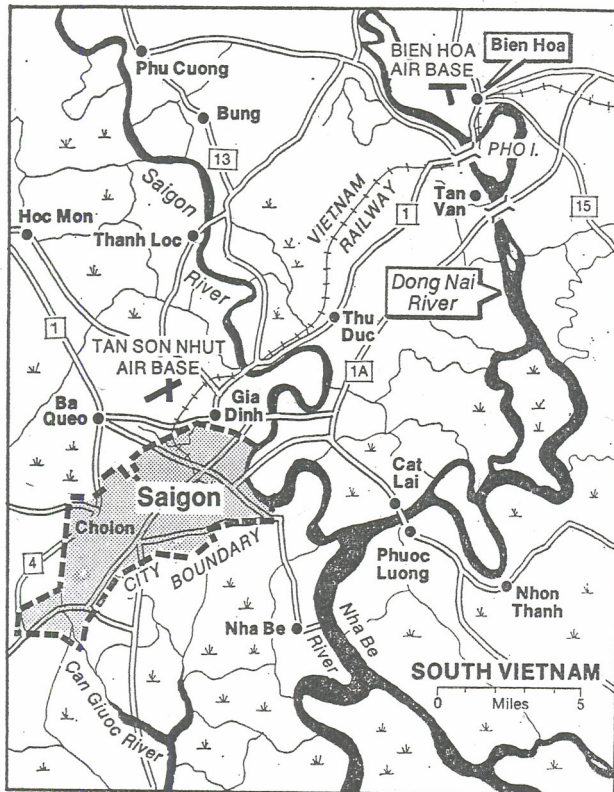
The main fighting in the delta yesterday was in the vicinity of Ben Tranh on Route 4 26 miles southwest of Saigon.

In other military developments, the South Vietnamese Air Force said its planes had influenced heavy casualties and damage in some areas today, especially to Communist positions outside Xuan Loc. Pilots reported killing 120 North Vietnamese troops and destroying three 130-mm. heavy artillery pieces three miles northwest of the town.

At the Bien Hoa air base, the major center of air operations left to the Saigon Government, air force sources said the field had been struck by four 130-mm. shells yesterday.

They said that many aircraft had already been moved to nearby Saigon because of the apparent danger posed by the approach of enemy artillery as well as the possibility of ground attacks on the base.

Hanoi Air Build-Up Reported
It was also reported during the day that the North Vietnamese Air Force, include MIG-21 supersonic fighters, was now operating at both Phu Bai airport, outside Hue, and at the huge American-built air base at Communist-occupied Da



The New York Times/April 18, 1975

Military sources in Saigon said final stand if necessary would come along the Dong Nai River.

Nang.

The MIG-21 is a short-range defense interceptor. The North Vietnamese Air Force, it was said, is not well equipped with ground-support combat planes of sufficient range to have an important effect in the fighting here.

Saigon authorities were said to have become concerned about the problem of safe storage of bombs for fighter-bombers.

The explosion of a bomb-storage depot at the Bien Hoa base earlier this week caused heavy damage at the field and racked Saigon, 15 miles south. Bombs are also stored at the Tan Son Nhut airport. A similar explosion there might cause major damage and casualties in the city and touch off panic.

The Bien Hoa explosion is believed due to Communist sabotage, although authorities say they have not determined the cause.

Speaking of the loss of Phan Rang and its air base, South Vietnamese Air Force sources said that Brig. Gen. Pham Ngoc Sang, commander of the Sixth Air Division, and Lieut. Gen. Nguyen Ving Nghi, commander of whatever is left of Military Region II, were last seen Wednesday afternoon outside the city trying to make their way to the shore.