

Fighting Slackens in Vietnam, Pressure on Saigon Keeps Up

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 24 (Reuters)—Fighting scaled down in South Vietnam in the past 24 hours, but Communist pressure was kept up on key Saigon defense points, a command spokesman said today.

Aircraft continued to pound Communist positions at several points around the capital yesterday. One series of raids struck near the lost provincial capital of Xuan Loc east of here.

The command reported heaviest Communist casualties from air raids in Tay Ninh Province to the northwest of the capital, with pilots claiming 120 of their enemy killed and a convoy of Soviet-built trucks destroyed.

Communist troops opened fire with rifles on a convoy of civilian buses on the Tay Ninh-Saigon road yesterday, killing five civilians, the command said.

Southwest of Saigon there was a series of attacks on police stations in Long An Province, where Communist forces have been putting heavy pressure on Route 4, the city's vital rice road.

Clashes were reported yesterday near Ben Luc, a district capital on the road only 16 miles from here, while more air strikes were made against Communist positions deeper in the Mekong delta.

CBU's Used Previously

The Vietcong accused the United States and South Vietnam today of "flouting all norms of morality and international law," using chemical bombs that cause instant asphyxiation.

Government military sources confirmed that such bombs—called the cluster bomb unit—had been used in the battle for Xuan Loc, a provincial capital captured by the Communists this week after a 14-day siege.

Victims die without a mark on their bodies. There have been reports that hundreds died that way in Xuan Loc.

"Those who have ordered the use of this type of bomb are war criminals," said a Vietcong spokesman here, quoting a statement.

Saigon government military sources said it was not the first time such bombs had been used in South Vietnam.

Earlier versions of the bomb, used in Cambodia and Laos as well as Vietnam, released small canisters that spread fragments of shrapnel over a wide area just before hitting the ground.

Comment by Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Reuters)—The Defense Department acknowledged that a United States-made bomb might have been used by the South Vietnamese to suffocate troops attacking Xuan Loc.

A Defense Department spokesman, Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, said that one version, the CBU-5b, had been tested in South Vietnam in 1970 for the clearing of helicopter pads but had been found to be inaccurate.

"It could be that's what the stories have been talking about," General Sidle said. The bombs might be capable of using all the air within 20 yards and suffocating troops, he added.

He said the bombs, which create very high pressures over the ground by explosions of aerosol, were never designed to be antipersonnel weapons.

Characteristics of Bomb

The Cluster Bomb Unit 55 was developed for the United States Air Force as a weapon against enemy minefields and booby-trapped areas. According to senior officers in the Pentagon, the bomb was designed in such a way that the maximum explosive force was directed downward onto a wide target to explode as many mines as possible.

The Air Force and the Army found the bombs ineffective for their designed purpose, the sources said. A few were left behind with the South Vietnamese when the United States forces withdrew from Vietnam.

Pentagon sources regarded as highly fanciful reports that "hundreds, perhaps thousands" of corpses had been found after bombing by these devices.