

NYTimes APR 28 1975 5,000 Homeless as Rockets Start Fires

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 27—Hundreds of people scraped laboriously through the ashes of their homes here this morning, but most of them found only pots of yellow roasted rice.

The rice had been cooked—overcooked—when a Communist rocket swished into a densely populated sium in downtown Saigon at 4 A.M. and started a large fire. By the time the blaze was put out, the local ward chief estimated, 500 houses had been destroyed and 5,000 people were homeless.

The 122-mm. rocket that hit the shantytown was part of a barrage of five the Communists fired into Saigon, apparently as a signal to force the Government

to meet their terms for peace talks. At least six persons were killed and 22 were wounded in the attack.

It was the first rocket attack on Saigon since 1971. Following the Paris peace agreement in January, 1973, Saigon's two million residents had come to feel relatively safe from such terror because of the presence of Hungarian and Polish delegates to the International Commission of Control and Supervision and a large Vietcong delegation housed at Tan Son Nhut airport.

Civilian Targets Routine

Although the rocket attack ended this feeling of security, there was nothing unusual about the Communists' shelling a civilian area. The North Viet-

namese have been firing mortars, artillery and rockets into villages, district capitals and provincial capitals every day since their offensive began March 8.

Today, for example, they shelled refugees fleeing along Route 1 from Bien Hoa to Saigon. Last night Communist artillery demolished parts of Phuoc Le, the capital of Phuoc Tuy province east of Saigon, and the day before they shelled Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia provincial capitals.

Last week North Vietnamese gunners destroyed the civilian provincial hospital in Tay Ninh city.

The 122-mm rocket, which the Communists used in this

Continued on Page 16, Column 5

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

morning's attack on Saigon, is a seven-foot-long Soviet or Chinese-made projectile that is aimed at a general area rather than a specific target. It does not have the accuracy to hit a narrowly pinpointed target.

Hotel Also Struck

The worst-hit area in Saigon this morning was the densely packed slum, near the national police headquarters, which perhaps was the intended target. Another rocket hit the roof of the Majestic Hotel, demolishing a newly built Government guest suite for official visitors.

A third rocket tore into a street where poor people were sleeping, killing two disabled war veterans. All that remained this morning was a blood-soaked pillow lying in the asphalt road.

Unlike Americans who might have been shaking with anger at the attack, especially since the war seems already over, most Vietnamese took it with Buddhist fatalism. There was no shouting or cursing, no imprecations against the Communists, and only a few people wept quietly as they poked through the wreckage.

"In the past we saw refugees sleeping under tents, we could not stand the sight," said a middle-aged woman as she squatted among the broken bricks, charred pieces of wood

and heap of ashes, all that was left of her house. "Today it is our turn."

Grabbed Children and Ran

Judging by what was left of the walls of her house, it had been 6 feet wide and 10 feet long, and it was built up against neighboring dwellings on all sides. The area that was burned, about the size of two football fields placed side by side, was so tightly packed that the only passageways between houses were tiny alleys barely wide enough for a person to squeeze through sideways.

"When I first heard the noise of the rocket, I thought it was

a thief who fell on our tin roof," the woman recalled. "We were so close it didn't sound so loud. I grabbed the children and ran, we didn't have time to pick up any of our belongings," added the woman, whose husband is a navy enlisted man.

Her son, who was also picking through the ashes, had on a brown T-shirt with Pittsburgh Steelers and a large white football helmet stenciled across it.

Overhead a United States Air Force C-141 jet transport rose noisily from the airport on its way to Guam with another load of American and Vietnamese refugees.

"All our money was in there," the woman said, pointing to a metal pail full of yellowed rice. "The VC shoot here, but they don't know what they are shooting at." It was her only political remark.

Nearby a group of people pulled the body of an elderly woman out of heap of rubble. It had no head.

At the Majestic Hotel, on the Saigon River waterfront, the Communist rocket destroyed the entire top floor.

Open to the Sky

The ceiling was open to the sky, glass shards were all over the marble floor, and antique carved Vietnamese chairs were smashed into pieces. The floor had recently been converted into a state guest house but had never been used.

According to the manager of

the Majestic, Pham Nhu Hoanh, it was the first time in the long war that the hotel had been hit by a rocket. The Majestic is a heavy-looking, ornate colonial edifice that once provided a favorite view of fighting around the city. In recent years it has been less popular because its plumbing was outmoded and its high-ceilinged rooms were not easily air-conditioned.

Nearby is a large vacant lot that was to be the site of a new Hyatt Regency hotel.

The only person killed in the Majestic was the night watchman, Nguyen Van Bay, a policeman who moonlighted at night by guarding the state guest house. His pants, neatly folded, still lay next to a blood-soaked board he had been sleeping on. The pants were laced with shrapnel, and the pockets had somehow filled with crushed glass.

The manager said no one had checked out since the attack this morning. But, he added, there are still some rooms available.