

Reds Pull Back From Big Air Base

Saigon

Viet Cong commandos withdrew from the edge of Tan Son Nhut airbase today, clearing the way for the final U.S. evacuation from South Vietnam.

Earlier Communist troops pounded the base with artillery and mortar fire, causing heavy damage and leaving two U.S. Marines dead.

The airport was open to military traffic, but jittery guards sealed off the main gates and turned back would-be evacuees who ignored a 24-hour curfew and made a last-ditch attempt to escape the country.

In downtown Saigon, trucks pulled up at the Brink hotel and took out all Americans there in the start of the final evacuation of U.S. citizens.

Military sources said a Viet Cong regiment of unknown strength withdrew this morning to a command post at Tan Phu Trung village on Highway 1, about ten miles north of the airbase.

They earlier overran two government ranger battalions in the area, the sources said.

They said the forward Viet Cong positions were in an arc two miles northwest to north of the base. Two battalions of crack government special forces, paratrooper, and infantrymen moved out trying to secure the area.

The U.S. Embassy said

two American Marines died in the predawn offensive that blew up planes and further crippled the government's battered air force, shot down two South Vietnamese aircraft and saw the Communists capture three villages at the airport's edge.

The attacks quickly underscored the failure of new President Duong Van Minh's initial quest for peace. Minh was sworn in only hours earlier as the nation's third president within a week, and issued a plea to the Communists for an immediate cease-fire.

The unidentified Marine guards were the first Americans to die in war action in Vietnam since December, 1973. The U.S. Embassy radio said their bodies were taken to a hospital just outside the base on the edge of Saigon.

As the bombardment

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eased, U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin left his residence under heavy security guard and headed for the joint general staff compound at Tan Son Nhut to confer with South Vietnamese commanders.

The attacks followed by only 11 hours the first air assault of the war on Tan Son Nhut—a raid by four American-built A-37 jets that destroyed 11 parked planes in two bombing runs, then fled to a field at Communist-held Phan Rang 165 miles northeast of the capital.

Tan Son Nhut operates as

the center for the evacuation in which U.S. Air Force transports have airlifted thousands of Vietnamese to refugee camps across the Pacific. The attacks today temporarily halted the airlift.

The Communists, already all but surrounding the capital, opened their attack with a barrage of more than 20 rockets and with highly accurate Soviet-made 130mm artillery—explosive evidence they likely have Saigon itself within range of their biggest guns.

The rockets and mixture of artillery and mortar shells smashed into runways

and tore into what remains of South Vietnam's already crippled air force. Ammunition blew up, rocking Saigon. Planes were set afire, lighting the skies above the capital.

At 8:30 a.m. a fuel dump at the base exploded, sending yet another black mushroom cloud into the sky.

Under the rocket and artillery barrage, Communist troops hit the base's western defenses with small arms fire and B-40 rockets. Apparently coordinated attacks erupted in Saigon's "sister city" of Cholon, South Vietnamese police broadcasts said.

A senior government officer said the Communist attacks did not involve regular infantry troops but that North Vietnamese army commandos were leading them.

As the sun rose, thick black clouds poured from Tan Son Nhut. Government planes and helicopter swept

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into the skies to try to pinpoint Communist positions and stop the advance. Within minutes, two South Vietnamese planes were shot down, apparently by Soviet-made ground-to-air SA-7 missiles.

Despite the attack, one U.S. C-141 Starlifter jet transport sped down the runway and took off, apparently undamaged.

Saigon was placed under a 24-hour curfew. The health department called all hospital workers to their jobs on an emergency basis.

Military sources said Communist commandos captured three villages in Hoc Mon district, about one mile from Tan Son Nhut's center, and that fighting was under way at three other villages.

Other attacks were reported in the Mekong Delta. Field reports said three 122 mm rockets hit Can Tho, South Vietnam's seventh largest city, 75 miles southwest of Saigon. One round hit the riverfront Gioi hotel, killing and wounding at least ten persons.

Confusion and panic mounted in Saigon as the government's position appeared to crumble even more swiftly. Military sources said South Viet-

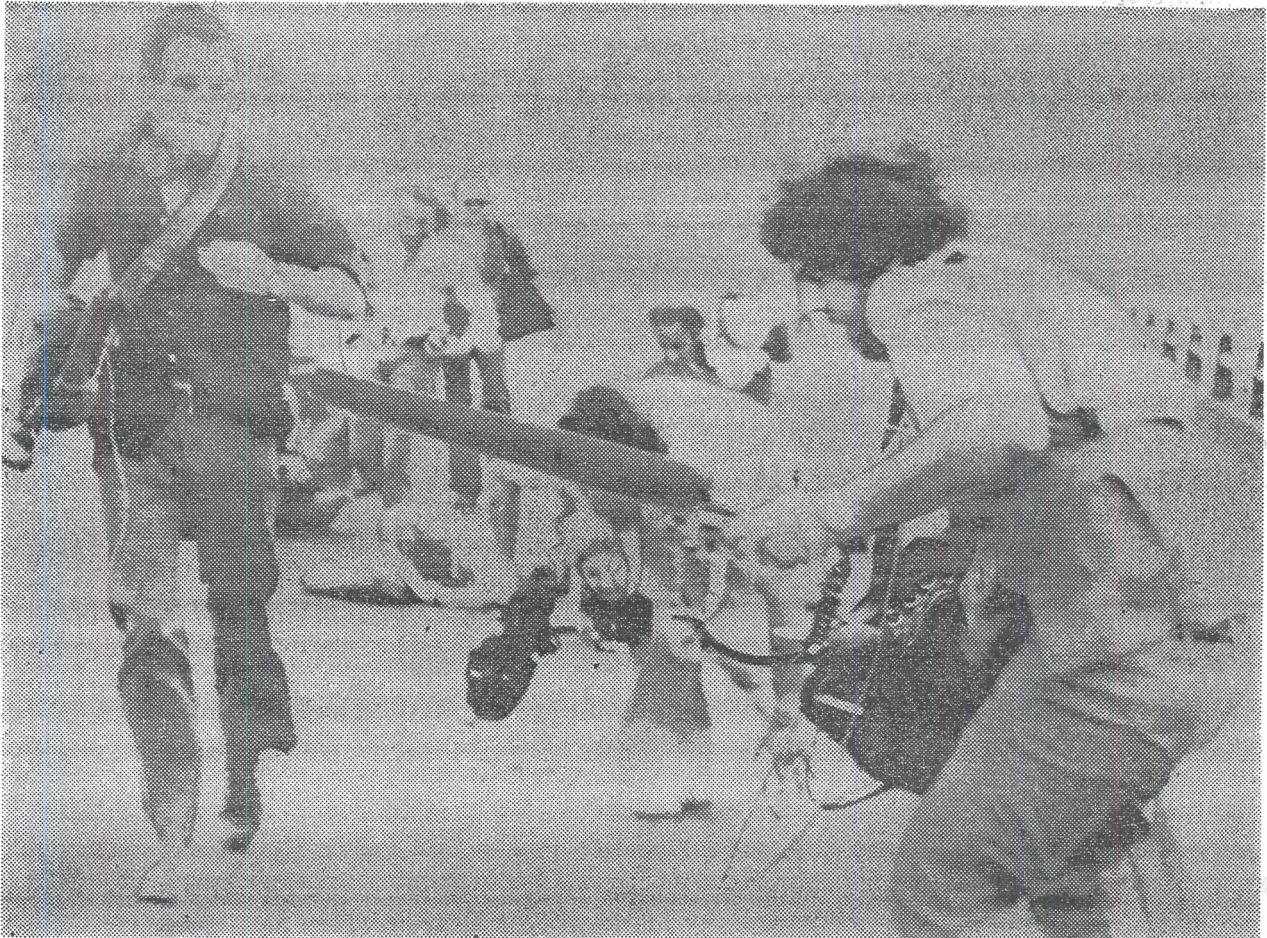
nam's highest ranking military officer, joint chief of staff Chairman General Cao Van Vien, and an unspecified number of other senior officers fled the country aboard Vien's private C-47.

Earlier yesterday, Malaysia and the Philippines announced they were closing their embassies in Saigon.

Minh took over as president in a last-ditch bid by South Vietnam to negotiate peace and stave off military defeat. But his call for a cease-fire went unheeded by the Communists.

A North Vietnamese spokesman in Paris said Minh's call for peace did not meet Communist conditions for a ceasefire, and a Viet Cong spokesman in Saigon said the president's remarks were "not in keeping" with Viet Cong demands.

United Press



AP Wirephoto

Unidentified members of a television news crew ran for cover during fighting on outskirts of Saigon