

Hanoi General Was Surprised At Speed of Saigon's Collapse

**Says He Didn't Plan
Final Victory in '75**

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

Special to The New York Times

HONG KONG, April 25—North Vietnam's leaders did not expect their offensive last year to achieve complete victory and were surprised by the speed of Saigon's collapse, according to a lengthy new account by Hanoi's Chief of Staff of the war's final battles.

Gen. Van Tien Dung, the Chief of Staff, reported that

Excerpts from Dung's report are printed on page 16.



Nayan Chanda

Gen. Van Tien Dung as he appeared in Saigon on May 15, 1975, at a celebration marking Hanoi's victory.

when hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese troops and civilians fled in panic from Pleiku in the Central Highlands, beginning the rout, he was almost incredulous.

"Why such a retreat? And who had given the order for it?" he writes Hanoi's Politburo and top generals had planned only a series of attacks that would set the stage for a general offensive and uprising in 1976 to "completely liberate the South."

General Dung's disclosure is

contained in a remarkably detailed and candid account of how Hanoi planned and achieved its final victory in South Vietnam last year. The report, written in the first person, is being carried in serialized form by two of Hanoi's

**Vietnamese Voters
Elect Assembly**

By United Press International

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 25—Sirens called North and South Vietnamese voters to the polling places today to elect a joint National Assembly for this divided nation's first unified government in 30 years.

The assembly elections were the first to be held throughout the country since 1946 when Vietnam declared its independence from France and protracted war enveloped Indochina.

All but a few people over the age of 18 were eligible to vote for 492 National Assembly members from North and South Vietnam. In Saigon there were 44 men and women candidates for 35 seats. The assembly will have no opposition members.

The real power will continue to rest with the Politburo of the Lao Dong, or Workers, Party in Hanoi.

"We are waiting only for the results of the elections to

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Vietnamese Voters Elect a New Joint Assembly

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seal the reunification of the North and South," the Saigon radio said in special broadcasts that replaced regular news programs.

Duong Van Minh, the former general who surrendered South Vietnam to the Communists last April 30, walked with his wife from his retirement home in Central Saigon to a voting booth two blocks away.

"I would like everyone to do his duty as a citizen and vote for a unified Vietnam," General Minh told reporters.

"This is the most important

day in the history of our country," said South Vietnam's Foreign Minister, Nguyen Thi Binh. The official radio reported that Mrs. Binh was the first voter in her ward in Saigon, which the new Communist regime calls Ho Chi Minh City.

Workers Given Day Off

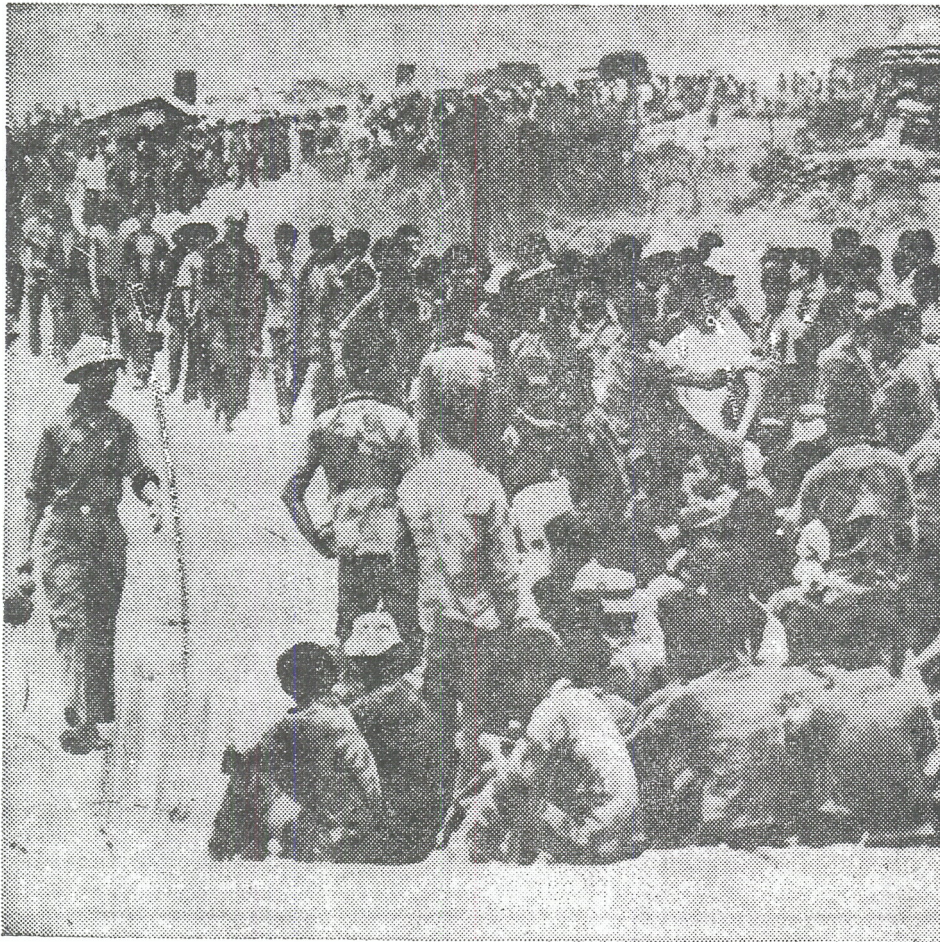
Sirens sounded the call to the polls, persons who normally worked today were given a day off and the Archbishop of Saigon asked Roman Catholics to attend Sunday services on Saturday to avoid interfering with the voting.

The Government reported "A massive turnout," about 90 per-

cent in some wards. The radio repeated Ho Chi Minh's slogan, "Vietnam is one, the people of Vietnam are one."

Traditional songs with revolutionary lyrics celebrated the Communist forces' defeat of the United States-backed regime a year ago. "This is the time of independence, freedom and socialism," one refrain said.

"We are going to the voting booths to return our national leadership to the people from the former French colonialists and the U.S. imperialists," singers sang to the accompaniment of bamboo flute music.



Pictorial Parade

South Vietnamese soldiers by the thousands surrendered or were captured in the coastal regions of South Vietnam after resistance collapsed in the highlands. This photo of South Vietnamese prisoners was made in Da Nang in late March of 1975.

Hanoi General Tells of His Surprise At Speed of Saigon's Collapse in '75

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official newspapers, Nhan Dan and Quan Doi Nhan Dan, under the title "Great Spring Victory—A Summation of Senior General Van Tien Dung of the Combat Situation in the Spring of 1975."

So far nine installments totaling about 40,000 words have appeared, bringing the narrative up to the sudden abandonment of Pleiku on March 16, six weeks before the fall of Saigon. It is not known how many more articles will appear.

General Dung's account is evidently timed to coincide with the first anniversary of the Communists' triumphant

entry into Saigon on April 30 and with today's election in North and South Vietnam for a unified national assembly.

General Dung and Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's Minister of Defense, jointly published last July a much shorter and less detailed report of the victory.

Directed From Hanoi

Apparently because the Communists have now essentially achieved reunification of the North and the South, General Dung makes no effort to preserve earlier Communist statements that there was a separate movement in the South, which they called the National Liberation Front and Ameri-

cans termed the Vietcong.

On the contrary, General Dung, who is a member of the Politburo of the Lao Dong, or Workers' Party, provides a vivid description of how the Politburo and the Central Military Party Committee, operating from what he calls "Dragon House" in Hanoi, directed the war.

For instance, the general reports that to supply their forces in the South 30,000 North Vietnamese troops and "Shock youths," including women, built a network of roads inside South Vietnam after the 1973 Paris peace agreement ended American bombing. The new network, which he says was 12,000 miles long replaced the less convenient Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran west in Laos and Cambodia.

Included in the new system were one 25-foot-wide highway from the North Vietnamese border to Loc Ninh near Saigon, 3,000 miles of oil pipelines and a cable-telephone system linking Hanoi with Loc Ninh. As a result of this system, General Dung says, when the 316th North Vietnamese Division was ordered to move from North Vietnam to the Central Highlands in the South, it was transported directly in 500 trucks.

General Dung, a 59-year-old native of North Vietnam, records that he was delegated by the Politburo to go to the South to take personal command of the main part of the 1975 campaign, which was to be launched in the Highlands.

Southerners Called to Hanoi

To conceal his involvement and to prevent American or South Vietnamese intelligence from discovering that a major offensive was about to occur, General Dung took elaborate precautions. His personal Soviet-made Volga sedan continued to make its regular rounds to his house and office after his departure, and "late in the afternoon, the troops would come to the courtyard at my house to play volleyball as usual, because I have the habit of playing volleyball after the afternoon working hours with them."

The general's secretary, who accompanied him to the South, feigned illness and was taken by ambulance to a hospital, from which he could leave without his neighbors suspecting anything.

General Dung makes several other disclosures and important points.

Hanoi reached its decision to

attack in the Central Highlands, and to begin with an assault on the town of Ban Me Thuot, at a series of Politburo meetings from Dec. 18 to Jan. 8. The senior Communist officials in South Vietnam, including Pham Hung, the fourth-ranking member of the Politburo, and Gen. Tran Van Tra, whom recent Communist articles have identified as the southern military commander, were called to Hanoi to attend the meetings.

The Central Highlands and particularly Ban Me Thuot were selected as the theater of battle, General Dung related, because Hanoi had learned that President Nguyen Van Thieu believed the Communists would attack Tay Ninh, near Saigon, and had stationed fewer troops in the highlands than in any other area.

Moreover, Saigon's commander in the highlands, Gen. Pham Van Phu, "miscalculated" that if the Communists did attack in the highlands, they would strike Kontum and Pleiku farther north and he had left only one regiment at Ban Me Thuot. But General Dung says that he secretly concentrated three divisions at Ban Me Thuot alone.

Notes U. S. Reductions

General Dung confirms statements by President Thieu and American officials that reductions ordered by Congress in American aid seriously impaired the South Vietnamese Army's ability to fight. By General Dung's estimate, Saigon's firepower was cut by 60 percent because of lack of bombs and ammunition, while its mobility was reduced by half, "due to lack of aircraft, vehicles and fuel." Nguyen Van Thieu was then forced to fight a poor man's war," the general wrote.

Throughout the fall of 1974, Hanoi's leaders "heatedly discussed" whether the United States would intervene again if the Communists staged a new offensive. Finally, Le Duan, the first secretary of the party, concluded that "having already withdrawn from the south, the United States could hardly jump back in." General Dung says that the Watergate scandal and America's economic troubles were important factors in Hanoi's thinking.

Collective Leadership

The general's account of lengthy meetings and lively debate seems to confirm what specialists have long believed, that Hanoi's leaders do function collectively and that Mr. Le Duan, while the most powerful figure in the North, is far from being a dictator. General Dung says that "unanimity" had to be

reached before the campaign plan could be put into operation, and he describes a military meeting at which Le Duc Tho, a civilian member of the Politburo, came in unexpectedly to check on what targets were being selected.

General Dung himself frankly admits that despite the Communists' quick victory in seizing Ban Me Thuot, some mistakes were made. One problem was the habit of caution developed after years of fighting against overwhelming American airpower and artillery.

"Our side, before launching an attack still proceeded with the full routine, made night time preparations and waited

till morning to attack," he wrote "Though the enemy air force made only limited attacks, flew at a high altitude and dropped bombs inaccurately, our troops were not allowed to move about in daytime but were compelled to wait, delay and waste time."

When the South Vietnamese unexpectedly began to flee Pleiku on March 15 before it had been attacked and headed toward the coast over an old, abandoned road, General Dung blamed the commander of the 320th Division, whose troops were in the area, for not heading off the enormous column of trucks, carts and bicycles.

'A Reproachable Mistake'

The Chief of Staff relates that he called the officer, whom he identifies as Comrade Kim Tuan, on the telephone and said: "This is a shortcoming, a reproachable mistake. At this time the slightest hesitation, mistake, fear of hardship or delay would mean failure. If the enemy escapes, you will be responsible."

In fact, the Communist failure to act faster against the refugee column gave the South Vietnamese troops and civilians a few extra days, but the group bogged down at a river crossing, which the South Vietnamese Army took almost a week to cover with a bridge. Few escaped in the end.

General Dung narrates dramatically his efforts to insure that the movements of the three North Vietnamese divisions — the 10th, the 316th and the 320th — around Ban Me Thuot would be kept secret. On March 5 a South Vietnamese unit captured a Communist artillery officer who was on a reconnaissance mission, along with his diary.

"We will attack Ban Me Thuot within four days," General Dung decided.

Mistaken Intelligence

Actually, American and South Vietnamese intelligence officers had been aware of the Communist troop movement for some time, but they assumed that they were either going to cut the few highland roads, which they also did, or move farther south to assault the town of Gia Nghia.

General Dung's own efforts to gather intelligence on Ban Me Thuot were not entirely successful either. Although Ban Me Thuot was a sleepy provincial town of fewer than 100,000 people, one Communist agent returned and reported that it was "very large, as large as Haiphong." Haiphong is North Vietnam's major port and second largest city.

When General Dung's troops overran Ban Me Thuot on March 10, he immediately dispatched a cable to Defense Minister Giap in Hanoi. In it he proposed to move north toward Pleiku, the major city of the Central Highlands.

But before he could move, President Thieu, in a move still not fully understood, ordered his forces to abandon the highlands.

General Dung, meeting with his aides outside Ban Me Thuot, was surprised. "Why such a retreat?" he wondered. "The Enemy had again made another grave strategic mistake."