

# HANOI AIDE CITES KEY THIEU 'ERROR'

General, Continuing Report,  
Tells of Panicky Decision  
to Abandon Highlands

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HONG KONG, April 14—North Vietnam's Chief of Staff, drawing on the testimony of a captured South Vietnamese colonel, has described how South Vietnam's President decided on the "error in strategy" that led to the rout of his forces a year ago.

In a new installment of a continuing narrative of the war's final battles, the Chief of Staff, Gen. Van Tien Dung, said President Nguyen Van Thieu suddenly decided on March 14, 1975, to abandon the Central Highlands out of panic at the surprise capture by Communist forces of the highlands town of Ban Me Thuot four days earlier.

"Once an error in strategy was committed, defeat in the war was certain," General Dung said.

"It would come sooner or later. The only thing is that it was we who led the enemy to commit this error and created that turning point in the war."

General Dung's account, titled "Great Spring Victory, A Summation of Senior Gen. Van Tien Dung's Accounts of the Combat Situation in the Spring of 1975," is being carried in serial form in Hanoi's newspapers and broadcast by the Hanoi radio. So far about 45,000 words have appeared, bringing the story up to the fall of Da Nang on March 29.

Earlier parts of General Dung's narrative, in which he described how North Vietnam's senior political and military leaders planned last year's offensive, were published in the New York Times on Monday.

Among the points emerging from General Dung's account in the latest installments are these:

According to two captured

South Vietnamese colonels, President Thieu reached his decision to abandon the Central Highlands at a meeting with his top military aides at Cam Ranh Bay only the day before the beginning of the panicky exodus that led to the fall of Saigon on April 30.

The South Vietnamese Army's total collapse at Da Nang, the country's second largest city, where soldiers stampeded over one another to run away before the Communists attacked, looks even worse in retrospect, for General Dung says that he ordered a Communist commander from Hanoi to fly south to take charge of the battle only on March 26. The city fell, without a fight, on March 29.

The North Vietnamese might have ended the war even more quickly, after the rout in the Central Highlands in mid-March, but General Dung decided to use his four divisions to advance eastward into Binh Dinh Province on the coast rather than head south for Saigon. The Communists' commander in the Saigon area, Gen. Tran Van Tra, sent General Dung a message in which he "regretted" that "he had not had sufficient forces" to capture more territory himself at the time.

## A Second-Hand Account

The South Vietnamese colonel quoted by General Dung in his account of how Mr. Thieu made his "error in strategy" was not himself present at the President's meeting at Cam Ranh Bay.

But the officer, Col. Pham Duy Tat, who commanded the large force of rangers in the highlands and who was highly regarded by other South Vietnamese officers, was reportedly informed of the meeting later that same day by his own superior officer, who did attend.

That officer was Gen. Pham Van Phu, the commander of the South Vietnamese forces in the highlands.

According to the account attributed to Colonel Tat, others who took part, besides President Thieu and General Phu, were Premier Tran Thien Khiem, the South Vietnamese chief of staff, Gen. Cao Van Vien, and President Thieu's special assistant for military intelligence, Gen. Dang Van Quang.

All these participants were later to leave South Vietnam

before the Communists' final victory on April 30. None has offered a public explanation of what happened.

Colonel Tat says, according to General Dung's account, that the crucial factor in Mr. Thieu's thinking was that there were not enough reinforcements that could be sent to bolster the highlands and enable General Phu to hold out against a Communist attack on Pleiku and Kontum. At that point the North Vietnamese had four divisions in the highlands, against two for the South Vietnamese, and the Communists had cut the only two usable highways into the vast, sparsely populated region.

The Communists had also severely shocked the Saigon command by capturing Ban Me Thuot, a town of 100,000, in only a day's fighting.

Although Colonel Tat did not refer to it, President Thieu is said by other knowledgeable South Vietnamese to have had before him an evacuation plan for the highlands drawn up half a year earlier by a retired Australian officer. The plan was based on an assumption that Mr. Thieu would put it into ef-

fect well before a Communist offensive.

But Mr. Thieu, always slow and cautious, had procrastinated, and evidently decided to act only when it was too late.

In Colonel Tat's version, General Phu quoted President Thieu as having given orders that "the regional forces should be left behind and no information of the withdrawal should be given to the province chiefs."

"Let them continue to defend," General Phu said, according to Colonel Tat's account. "Let us complete our withdrawal and let them find out about that later on."

While it is impossible to confirm Colonel Tat's account without word from any of the actual participants, Americans and Vietnamese who were in Pleiku when the withdrawal began the next day, March 15, have reported that the province chiefs were not informed of the move. The only persons who received instructions to pull out were the senior officers of the highlands command, but word of their evacuation quickly spread around the town, setting off the mass exodus.