

# Saigon Sees Tet Drive, Others Dubious

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PLEIKU, South Vietnam, Jan. 9—There are firm indications that the 12,000 man South Vietnamese Airborne Division will be sent to the Central Highlands soon to counter what high American and Vietnamese officials say is an imminent Communist offensive. However, many field officers here on the scene express doubt that such an offensive will take place.

There have often been large gaps between what allied military intelligence says will happen and what actually happens on the battlefield. This year there has been intense speculation for months that the Communist will try to mount large-scale offensives in the Central Highlands to embarrass President Nixon during his trip to China next month. The speculation has been encouraged by high-level American and Vietnamese officials in Saigon.

Last Dec. 20, President Nguyen Van Thieu called attention to "large infiltrations in the highlands of Military Region II." The region's commander, Lieut. Gen. Ngo Dzu, requested the airborne division last week.

An advance party has already arrived, but at the weekend General Dzu's officers at the most exposed outposts near the Laotian and Cambodian borders, as well as senior American advisers in Pleiku, appeared to feel much less worry than General Dzu or their superiors in Saigon have expressed.

**Hanoi Said to Move Unit**

One piece of allied intelligence information suggests that the Communists may plan to do something more ambitious this year in the Central Highlands than what they have done in the past four years at this season. That is the report that the 3,700 man 320th North Vietnamese Army's Division is on its way from its normal area of operations south of the demilitarized zone to infiltrate the highlands.

The report was cited by General Dzu in an interview Friday as the main reason for requesting the airborne division. His senior military adviser, Brig. Gen. George E. Wear, said later: "The information is pretty definite that the 320th is coming down, and the advance elements are reported 80 to 100 kilometers (50 to 60 miles)

north of the B-3 front"—the North Vietnamese designation for most of the Central Highlands region.

There are also vague fears that the Communists may try to attack major cities in the mountains along the coast at Tet, the Lunar New Year, which falls in the middle of February, a week before Mr. Nixon's visit. The largest enemy offensive of the war was at Tet in 1968, also an election year in the United States.

But General Wear commented: "There's no local intelligence that indicates anything different this year than last. They could come into a place like Pleiku or Kontum if it was a political thing they wanted, but I really don't think it's a lively possibility."

While General Dzu said there were fragmentary intelligence reports of enemy recruitment for units of the Vietcong main force in the more populated coastal lowlands in Binh-dinh Province, he voiced more concern about the threat to the Highlands.

Vietnamese officers and their American advisers at the frontier outposts of Benhet and Duclo there said this weekend that they were apprehensive about the possibility of being attacked in force next month. They were uneasy, they explained, mostly because things have been so quiet for a month.

When General Dzu sent two regiments of infantry and several battalions of rangers to the Cambodian border Friday to attack a Communist base area on the other side, 45 miles southwest of Pleiku, they found almost nothing.

Two days of B-52 strikes and of probes across the border produced almost no contact with the North Vietnamese regiment that supposedly lurks there. The ranger commander, Brig. Gen. Lam Son, described the operation as "a perfect military exercise."

The strongest Communist base area threatening the Highlands is in northeastern Cambodia, just a few miles down the road from Benhet, to which a ranger battalion was sent Thursday to reinforce the one there.

"We are getting reports from the montagnard villagers who live around here that there are

mechanized operations out in the hills," said Capt. William M. Perkins, one of the two American advisers at Benhet. "They might be building roads or they might be tanks."

General Dzu said that he had no plans now to send forces into the northeastern Cambodian region west of Benhet, called Base Area 609, where the North Vietnamese are believed to have about 15,000 troops in three regiments, but he did not rule out the possibility if he gets the airborne division.

The Communists have been attacking Benhet and nearby outposts Dakseang, Firebase 5, Firebase 6—for years. Last year the main dry-season offensive came in late March and early April, when they besieged Fire Bases 5 and 6 for two weeks and simultaneously staged a surprise attack on the district headquarters at Phunhon, some 80 miles south.

Given the regularity of such dry-season attacks here in the past, American and Vietnamese officers do not rule out—in-deed, they expect—sharp fighting in the hills this winter. General Dzu said he expected the main attacks to come from Base Area 609.

General Wear said: They could overrun Benhet or someplace like that if they wanted to, but I don't see how that would have much political impact. And if we keep Pleiku screened as we should, they shouldn't be able to get in on us. But then they shouldn't have been able to in 1968 either, and they did."