

American Intelligence Officials Predicted

Drive Is Seen Shifting To Highlands in Week

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 4—As the latest North Vietnamese drive in South Vietnam unfolds, American intelligence experts are being proved correct in their predictions that a big offensive was in the making.

It appears, however, that most of them miscalculated on the timing. They were uncertain on where in the country the assault would be focused and many now appear to have been surprised by the force with which the enemy has struck.

The North Vietnamese have gained control of roughly half of the northernmost province and have endangered the provincial capital of Quangtri city.

Moving behind heavy artillery fire, the North Vietnamese have taken more than a dozen South Vietnamese positions across the northern frontier in perhaps their most dramatic rout.

Scope Remains to Be Seen

Whether the South Vietnamese defenses have merely been bent, in the recent phrase of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, or whether they have clearly been broken is yet to be seen.

As one American official said tonight, "The scope and duration of this thing remains to be seen."

For the most part, intelligence officials are not disturbed by the failure to pinpoint the time or the place of the North Vietnamese offensive.

It was enough, many intelligence people feel, that an attack of large proportions was clearly seen in advance. Thus, the Administration was able to prevent the American public from being taken by surprise as it was during the Lunar New Year offensive of 1968.

Intelligence officers have been forecasting a North Vietnamese offensive since the beginning of the year. On the basis of the reports, American and South Vietnamese officials had issued statements declaring that the enemy would attack some time in February, prob-

ably either during the Lunar New Year holiday or at about the time President Nixon was in China.

When February passed quietly some analysts began saying that the anticipated attacks would be most likely to come in middle or late summer in an attempt to influence the Presidential election campaign in the United States.

Just two weeks ago an intelligence report sent to Washington predicted "a substantial increase" in enemy activity early in April. This view, however, apparently was not persuasive for Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the commander of American troops in South Vietnam, or Ellsworth Bunker, the American Ambassador.

Both Left Country

Both men left to spend Easter with their wives, General Abrams in Bangkok and Mr. Bunker in Katmandu, Nepal, where his wife, Carol C. Laise, is ambassador. They were back at their posts today.

Neither General Abrams nor Mr. Bunker has yet commented on the fighting.

In the beginning the analysts said they expected the North Vietnamese to center their attention in the northern provinces. But more recently they shifted their emphasis to the Central Highlands.

Today one exceptionally well-informed source said that on the basis of prisoner interrogations it appeared that the enemy offensive would consist of two phases.

The first phase, in the northern region, would last until about next Monday, the source predicted. Then, he said, fighting would probably break out in the Central Highlands and continue until the end of the month.

Motive for Attack

Intelligence analysts say they believe it is only coincidental that the attacks in the north have come on the heels of a breakdown in the Paris peace talks. They believe that the North Vietnamese may well be

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 1972

an Offensive but

Not Time and Place

attempting to occupy South Vietnamese territory to enhance their bargaining position.

For years there has been talk in South Vietnam that a negotiated settlement might give Quangtri Province to the north. The South Vietnamese Government has denied such a possibility, but it has been a concern for the residents of Quangtri.

Most officials believed that at some time during this election year the North Vietnamese would probably try to stage a drive to discredit President Nixon's Vietnamization program and swing votes to a Presidential candidate committed to a speedier and more complete withdrawal.