

Foe Arrives, Warns Villagers to Flee

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PHUOCHIEP, South Vietnam, April 25—North Vietnamese soldiers, about 300 strong, quietly made their way early today to this village 24 miles northwest of Saigon.

"Dear uncles and aunts," a political officer said through a portable loudspeaker. "You are advised to pack up and leave your homes before light. Otherwise you will run the risk of being killed by the puppet army artillery. The revolutionary forces will be here for three days."

A similar announcement was reportedly made in neighboring Trunglap, which the North Vietnamese reached late last night. In each area, the soldiers started digging trenches and building bunkers.

Told to Send Men

At 3 o'clock this morning a militiaman awoke Le Dinh Binh, the village chief here, with the news. The chief, who later related the story, radioed district headquarters and was told to send militiamen and members of the People's Self Defense Force—which is made up of those too young or too old to be in the regular forces and is meant primarily to serve as an early warning system—to chase the North Vietnamese away.

By 11 A.M., Mr. Binh said he had heard only one heavy exchange of gunfire and no one had been wounded.

As noon approached, he sat on a rough bench in front of the village headquarters with half a dozen other local officials, watching clouds of dust and powder rise a half mile away as artillery shells and bombs sporadically landed where the North Vietnamese were supposed to be.

An ambulance raced past with its siren screaming, three or four trucks of militiamen rolled past, stopped and started and then one

backed over a civilian's motor scooter. A helicopter circled for a while. One of its machine guns sounded out a few times and then the aircraft went away.

The village chief nervously sucked on a cigarette, his arms hugging his chest, and said he hoped the North Vietnamese could not come any closer.

"We are doing our best," he said. "There's nothing else I can do."

American and South Vietnamese officers were not sure what the North Vietnamese had in mind. The officers said they were afraid that the enemy soldiers would try to attack the district capital of Cuchi, which is four miles to the south and is regarded by many as the northwest gateway to Saigon, or that they would try to cut Route 1 between here and Cuchi.

American intelligence officers have been saying that the North Vietnamese could conceivably strike at Saigon. Some of them say that Cuchi would be an excellent staging area.

Another rather direct route would be to come out of the Parrot's Beak area in Cambodia and to drive southeasterly toward the capital. In such a case, taking Cuchi or simply blocking Route 1 in the vicinity of the town would make it difficult if not impossible for the Government to bring troops now operating northwest of Saigon to the defense of the capital.

It seems unlikely, however, that 300 North Vietnamese would try to take Cuchi. But at this point it is impossible to say whether the troops here and at Trunglap—identified as members of the 101st North Vietnamese Regiment—are operating alone or are merely the first to be discovered of a larger unit.

In Cuchi, which has a population under 20,000, the Government had mounted loudspeakers on utility poles on the two main streets. Be-

tween long runs of popular Vietnamese polytonal music there was a tape-recorded message:

"Firmly believe in the final victory of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam. Don't panic. The enemy will be defeated and we will win."

"I feel people here are getting nervous," said Khau Van Chau, as he stood barefoot and bare-chested in his jewelry shop, having just emptied its showcases.

"Since yesterday many women and children have left this town for Saigon or elsewhere," he continued. "My family, for example. Everyone has left and I'm all packed up and ready. If it should get a little bit worse I will leave immediately. My car is filled with gas. What remains is for me to push the starter and go."

The doors on several nearby shops had already been chained and padlocked. Some people who apparently have decided to stay, no matter what, have started building sandbag bunkers.

Many of the men and women from the villages invaded by the North Vietnamese have drifted into Cuchi. They left home in a hurry, as refugees usually do, and most of them have little more than the clothes on their backs.

They expressed little resentment toward the North Vietnamese. But an incident at Trunglap turned many of them against the Government forces.

When the villagers began to leave, as the enemy had instructed, some militiamen tried to turn the people around. A few shots were fired and two or three villagers were killed.

"The VC had the kindness to tell the villagers to go to avoid being killed by the fighting," said Mrs. Le Thi Tan.

"I don't know why the Government troops wanted us to stay," she said. "Maybe they wanted us to stay to make an obstacle for the VC."