

Viet Adviser

U.S. General Is Pessimistic

Hue, South Vietnam

As South Vietnamese Marines battled unsuccessfully for the second straight day to open the road to encircled Quang Tri, an American general here painted a pessimistic picture of the deteriorating northern front.

Brigadier General Thomas Bowen, the top adviser to the South Vietnamese in the region, described the government troops here as "battered" and said the situation at Quang Tri, the northernmost town still in friendly hands, is "tenuous."

The thrust of Bower's assessment at a briefing for newsmen last night was that the chances of South Vietnamese troops holding out at Quang Tri indefinitely are slim. "They're going to stay there as long as they can," he said. "There's no plan to abandon it in the next day or two."

SHELLING

Reports from Quang Tri indicate that the North Vietnamese troops are tightening their circle around the provincial capital and pouring heavier and heavier artillery fire into it. Bower estimated that the city took between 200 and 300 artillery shells during the day.

In addition to the South Vietnamese force at Quang Tri, there are also about 90 Americans — advisers and other GIs. The Americans were pulled back to their compound in the heart of the city yesterday leaving their South Vietnamese units.

Bowen said the government troops are outnumbered at Quang Tri and that sizable reinforcements would have to be moved into the region if the South Vietnamese are to try to counterattack. The Saigon government has already committed virtually all its strategic reserves and the outlook for reinforcements here is unlikely.

CASUALTIES

From all reports, it is clear that although the North Vietnamese are suffering far heavier casualties than the South Vietnamese, this has not deterred their advance.

"You can take any place if you're willing to pay the price and take the sacrifice," Bowen said. "The sacrifice doesn't seem to bother the enemy. Maybe Quang Tri's worth 3000 men to him."

The general said that with the situation in the north worsening, this front had become the "priority area" in South Vietnam more important to shore up at this point than the other two fronts, in the Central Highlands and further south.

Bowen said his reports indicate that the Communists have committed additional forces to the fight in the north, including another armored regiment.

HUE

He said there was no immediate threat to Hue, which is nearly 40 miles below Quang Tri on besieged Highway 1, but that if the North Vietnamese bring in their best two divisions

from the north "we would have a major problem."

"The enemy is moving quite a lot of stuff," he added. "There isn't any question in my mind that their objective is Hue."

Many military and civilian observers here believe that the North Vietnamese very much want to set up a provisional government in this former imperial capital of Vietnam.

"It's a big enough city and well known enough city to hang their hat on," Bowen said.

AIR

The general described the allied air support yesterday as "magnificent," with fighter bombers and helicopters — South Vietnamese and American — carrying out over 250 attacks, the most ever on a single day in the region. There were also an unspecified number of bombing missions by B-52s, some of which could be heard in Hue.

Yet despite this heavy air support and attempts by South Vietnamese Marines to break through, the Communists kept the road cut between Quang Tri and Hue.

Since it remained impossible to resupply Quang Tri by road, air drops were attempted, but planes came under heavy fire from Communist ground forces. Two successful air drops of artillery fuses were made to government units in Quang Tri.

REFUGEES

Civilians continued to pour out of the Quang Tri area fleeing the fighting. North Vietnamese troops are firing on vehicles carrying refu-

gees, and many of the refugees have been killed or wounded.

Fleeing the area along with the refugees are an increasing number of deserting government troops, many of whom have arrived in Hue.

This city, which normally has a population of 200,000, swollen to 300,000 by the first wave of refugees when the Communist offensive began a month ago, has had another 50,000 people added to its population in the last few days.

Many thousands more are expected to pour in. At the same time, fears of a Communist attack are rising among the residents of Hue, and a mounting number of people are packing up and heading south.

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