

Pessimism in Saigon

Army's Inability to Defend the South Puts Government in a Perilous Stage

NYTimes

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY MAY 3 1972

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 2—The loss of South Vietnam's northernmost province and the collapse of two of its combat divisions in the last week have brought the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu to a perilous stage.

Both American and Vietnamese officials here and elsewhere are deeply pessimistic — for the first time in years — about the country's prospects of pulling through.

The growing consensus among Americans here is that the South Vietnamese armed forces, in their country's hour of greatest danger, have unexpectedly proved unequal to the task of defending it. The principal reason is that the commanders, never before tested so rigorously, are not spurring the troops to resist the three-front North Vietnamese onslaught with the vigor and determination that would be required to repel rather than stalemate it.

Vietnamese observers in Hue described the scene in the former imperial capital today as "an agony," with the streets full of soldiers running aimlessly about.

The road from Hue south to Danang, Vietnam's second largest city, is jammed with refugees and with soldiers who appear to be deserters, trying to make their way to safety.

A senior American official in Danang said tonight that the

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Third Infantry Division was "finished as an effective fighting force" after its rout from Quangtri yesterday. And in the Central Highlands provinces of Binh Dinh and Kontum, American and South Vietnamese officials were saying the same thing about the 22d Division over the weekend.

So far the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu has not made a public pronouncement about the loss of Quangtri. The President, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and Gen. Creighton W. Abrams met for an hour in the Presidential Palace to discuss the steadily worsening situation.

The options of South Vietnam and of the United States in the fourth year of troop withdrawals are severely limited.

The South Vietnamese have committed their entire strategic reserve to the three fronts, and though they can hold the North Vietnamese between thrusts, they have proved unable to halt renewed attacks in the northern provinces and in the highlands.

Since President Nixon has publicly ruled out the use of the United States ground forces to rescue its allies, the principal option available is bombing. The Administration has carried out saturation B-52 raids on targets deep in North Vietnam for the first time in the war, but so far its retaliation raids have been limited in scope and duration; they could become more intense if the Administration chose to make them so.

The only recent raids on Hanoi and Haiphong were made on April 16. The last time B-52's struck in North Vietnam was on April 24. But, an American general said, "you haven't seen the last of that yet."

Even the Americans do not feel any more—if, indeed, they ever did—that air power can stop the North Vietnamese offensive. "If the South Vietnamese would just hold on and establish a line as they did in Anloc," an officer said, referring to the front 60 miles north of Saigon, "and stop the enemy long enough, air strikes can take their maximum effect and maybe do some good."

On the other hand, an American adviser in Binh Dinh Province, speaking after South Vietnamese fled rather than resist the Communist take-over of Hoaian District two weeks ago, said, "The best weapon is the guy with the M-16 on the ground, and he just isn't there."

Though American civilian and military officials here have not yet made a negative judgment on the South Vietnamese forces across the country, their

collapse in the area near the demilitarized zone this week has caused many to entertain grave doubts.

It has become clear that a final test is underway for the American policy of Vietnamization, which has meant turning over the ground combat responsibilities to the South Vietnamese and withdrawing American ground forces but maintaining a strong presence with air power—bolstered to more than 700 warplanes this week with the arrival of a fifth aircraft carrier, the Midway.

The North Vietnamese have emphasized in broadcasts that the defeat of Vietnamization is one of their principal aims. So far they have not made strong attacks on any large American units although 6,000 United States combat troops were among the 68,000 soldiers still here as of last Thursday.

For all the pounding the North Vietnamese have taken since they began their offensive, allied officials concede, they have done alarmingly well—taking over Quangtri Province in the north, much of Dinhlong Province close to Saigon and the northern third of Binh Dinh Province on the central coast, meanwhile making slow gains in the Mekong Delta and in provinces west and northwest of Saigon.

Unlike the Americans and the South Vietnamese, the Communists still have several options open.

They are apparently preparing a pincer movement against Hue, with thousands of troops advancing on the city from the north and from jungle redoubts to the southwest. They have not yet committed any sizable guerrilla forces to terrorist actions in Danang and Saigon, but intelligence officers here expect that they will in the coming months. When they do, the demoralization of the population, already in its initial stages with mass flights from Quangtri, Hue, Binh Dinh and Kontum, is bound to grow.

Today—the issues grow and change daily—the biggest problem is Hue, where, according to American observers, a third to a half of the civilian population is fleeing toward Danang by every possible means.

What has been the Saigon Government's response to the deepening crisis?

President Thieu has gone on national television only once to brace the nation for what lies ahead. On April 5 he said: "This is the decisive moment, where the survival or loss of our country is at stake. The present battle is the decisive battle, the outcome of which will determine the loss or survival of the people of South Vietnam."

Since then he has maintained t

a puzzling silence amid mounting evidence that for many war-weary people the Government's guarantees of security and military victory sound hollow.

Today the Saigon Government's press agency published a warning that intelligence sources had reported that North Vietnamese troops were under orders to "kill on the spot" Government soldiers who surrendered or were taken prisoner.

The warning came after thousands of militiamen as well as regular soldiers of the 22d Infantry Division gave up their posts and left their weapons behind in Binh Dinh Province rather than contest the North Vietnamese for three districts inhabited by 200,000 people.

"All of us feel some frustration," an officer at United States headquarters said. "I'm sure General Abrams feels frustrated too. I know he went down to see General Vien yesterday."

Success on One Front

Gen. Cao Van Vien is the chief of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, although President Thieu has called most of the critical shots in the deployment of reserve forces in recent weeks.

The one front on which the South Vietnamese have been able to hold off their attackers for almost a month is the one closest to Saigon, in Binh Long Province, 60 miles to the north. But American officers, initially proud of the performance of their allies there, are now worried because the South Vietnamese have not pushed the Communists back across the Cambodian border and fear that they may not be able to hold if the enemy mounts an intense attack.

A 10,000-man force of paratroops and infantrymen from the Fifth Division has been undergoing heavy artillery bombardment in the devastated

town of Anloc for three weeks and has not been resupplied except by helicopter and parachute.

In the face of the grim battlefield prospects, some Vietnamese politicians and even Cabinet officials have begun the faintest stirrings of rebellion against the policy of peace through war. If the military situation continues on a downward slide, it is not impossible that a movement for a negotiated settlement may gain momentum.

Loss of Face for Thieu

"How is the situation in the north?" a Government functionary asked. When he was told, he remarked, "I think we may have to reach a settlement soon."

Many Vietnamese political figures feel that President Thieu suffered a serious loss of face last week when the Nixon Administration changed its mind and agreed to a North Vietnamese proposal to go back to the Paris peace talks. The South Vietnamese had vowed only the day before that the allies would not return to the negotiating table until Hanoi had stopped the invasion.

The peace talks have not yet been Vietnamized; the negotiations between Washington and Hanoi are the focus of interest. If they continue to be fruitless and the Americans decide to step up their punishment of the North, many Vietnamese believe, it will not help in the present hour of need. The South Vietnamese press is full of false reports about United States marines landing in Binh Dinh or even in North Vietnam to come to Saigon's rescue once again.

The most realistic among the Southerners are aware that such intervention is all but impossible in 1972. The offensive could bring them to act on their own—if not decisively in the field, then in other ways still quite as unforeseeable as the course of the fighting.