

War Assessment

Pentagon's Gloomy View

By Thomas B. Ross
Chicago Sun-Times

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon, in its gloomiest assessment so far, declared yesterday that the battlefield situation in Vietnam is "very serious."

The assessment seemed to reflect a new estimate by high-ranking military men in Saigon that the North Vietnamese offensive could continue beyond the U.S. presidential election next November.

Originally, the official military estimate was that the offensive would come to a halt with the rainy season later this month.

Hardening

The prospect of prolonged election year fighting perhaps accounts for the hardening tone of President Nixon's remarks about North Vietnam over the past few days.

Pentagon spokesman Jerry Friedman made no mention of the private military reassessment but switched abruptly from his optimistic appraisal of Monday.

"It is a very serious situation," he said. "The South Vietnamese have a very difficult battle going... the battle has been joined and we will see what the outcome will be."

"It's too early to claim victory and it's certainly far too early to throw in the towel."

Assured

By contrast, Nixon said last Wednesday that he had been assured by Gen. Creighton Abrams, U.S. commander in Vietnam, that "the enemy will fall after several more weeks of very hard fighting."

By Sunday, however, the

Moorer on the War:
'Only Time Will Tell'

WASHINGTON — (AP) — Adm. Thomas Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was quoted as telling Republican congressional leaders at the White House today that "only time will tell" the results of the current fighting in Vietnam.

House Republican leader Gerald Ford of Michigan told reporters he emerged from the session with a sense of "cautious optimism."

The House GOP chief said bad weather in the weeks ahead and supply difficulties

for Hanoi's forces could end the offensive from the North.

Ford said Nixon is entertaining all options except use of nuclear weapons and re-introduction of American ground troops.

Ford, who seemed intent on placing the military situation in its best possible light, said he was encouraged because, as he sees it, there has been no disintegration of popular support for the Saigon government. In addition, he said Moorer reported the enemy was taking very heavy casualties.

President seemed to be less confident that the offensive could be contained that quickly. In a long chat with

a group of rich Texans at Treasury Secretary John Connally's ranch, he implied that massive reprisals on

North Vietnam might be needed to stop the advance.

Evidence

Pentagon sources indicated that the gloomy military reassessment from Saigon arrived here sometime between the President's upbeat remarks of Wednesday and his dire warnings of Sunday.

The reassessment reportedly pointed to new evidence that the North Vietnamese had been able to pre-position much larger quantities of supplies than had been previously estimated in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

That would give them the capacity to resupply from nearby stockpiles throughout the rainy season and keep up the offensive at least on an intermittent basis. Then, with clearing weather in late September and October, full-scale fighting could be resumed with fresh supplies moved down from North Vietnam during the monsoon.

If the reassessment proves accurate, the sources suggested, Nixon's options might be reduced to the final choice of negotiating a face-saving retreat at the Paris peace talks or ordering terror bombing of North Vietnam.