

So. Viets Launch First Offensive

Examiner News Services

SAIGON — South Vietnamese troops launched their first counterattack today since the enemy began an offensive 36 days ago.

At the same time, the government and the United States began a crash program aimed at reversing military defeats.

President Nguyen Van Thieu flew today to the threatened city of Hue for urgent talks with his military commanders on the situation in the north.

He smiled and expressed confidence despite the shattering defeats in Quang Tri, 32 miles to the north.

Several hundred South Vietnamese paratroopers made a combat assault in the central highlands in an effort to clear North Vietnamese from the Chu Pa mountain pass on Highway 14 between Kontum and Pleiku.

Field reports said 40 North Vietnamese troops had been killed in the initial fighting.

Associate Press correspondent David J. Paine reported from Pleiku that the combat assault was made eight miles south of Kontum and 19 miles north of Pleiku in efforts to reopen the vital supply route.

The South Vietnamese paratroopers ran into enemy resistance shortly after being landed by helicopter and at dusk fighting was still reported.

Kontum, under threat of enemy attack both from the north and west, has been cut off by road from Pleiku for several weeks.

Although the counterat-

tack is small compared to the over-all North Vietnamese offensive, it seemed to be an attempt to gain the initiative in at least one area.

South Vietnamese troops fleeing southward from Hue along Highway streamed back today on orders of their new commander who directed that they return and defend the city or be shot on sight.

Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, who took over as commander of the five province 1st Military Region, assigned 100 50-caliber machine gun equipped armored cars to back up his order.

Truong also ordered an "execution wall" construction in Hue to serve a stark reminder to would-be deserters or stragglers.

It is seven feet high, made of bluish-green sandbags, and has six-foot poles in front of it where soldiers being executed would be tied.

Truong's predecessor was fired yesterday for losing Quang Tri, the northernmost provincial capital.

The North Vietnamese on the northwest, within six miles on the west and 10 miles on the southwest.

The Saigon command said fighting countrywide had slackened off today to its lowest level of the North Vietnamese offensive.

Sightings of truck convoys, however indicated that the enemy was pausing again to regroup and resupply for another wave of assaults.