

Hue Is Bracing and Rearming For Assault Expected in Week

By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG

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HUE, South Vietnam, May 10 — As South Vietnamese commanders continued their hectic attempts to rebuild the weakened defenses of Hue, an American military official predicted today that the North Vietnamese would begin their assault on this crucial city within a week, and perhaps in the next few days.

The American official said that he believed the Communists would make a determined attempt to take Hue in time to celebrate the anniversary of Ho Chi Minh's birthday—May 19—in this former imperial capital of Vietnam.

The new South Vietnamese commander for the northern region, Lieut. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, is apparently using every possible man and weapon available to him to try to hold this city, which the Communists presumably want for a provisional government capital.

General Truong replaced Lieut. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, who was relieved of the northern command a week ago after the troops of the South Vietnamese Third Division and other units abandoned the city of Quangtri, about 40 miles north of Hue, without any serious fight, in defiance of orders.

The Third Division fled Quangtri in disorder on May 1, many of its men deserting. Only a few of its units are still intact.

New U.S. Tanks on Hand

General Truong is now trying to pull together these units, and weld them, along with the South Vietnamese First Marine Division and the First Infantry Division, into an effective defense force.

South Vietnamese airborne reinforcements — plus new American tanks from Japan and artillery from the United States — have also been shipped in hurriedly, and it is estimated that the South Vietnamese force around Hue now numbers 30,000 to 35,000 men. How many of these can be classified as combat-ready is unknown.

Ever since the fall of Quangtri a week ago, the northern front has been relatively quiet and this has given the South Vietnamese a badly needed respite to try to regroup and resupply.

But it has given the North Vietnamese the same breather to refresh their supplies and regroup for a major assault on Hue. The Communists have reportedly suffered severe losses, largely from American air strikes, but they seem to be willing to take the heavy casualties and the battering has not slowed their drive significantly.

Counterattack Ruled Out

Both American and South Vietnamese officials have declined to estimate publicly how many troops the enemy has gathered

for the attack on Hue, but it is apparently a large enough force to convince the allies of the impossibility of a counterattack aimed at throwing the Communists off balance and taking away their initiative.

All the South Vietnamese preparations are solely for the defense of Hue, not for any offensive missions.

While allied officials here acknowledge that fire power from planes and artillery alone cannot stop the North Vietnamese — ground troops are considered the crucial quantity — they are hoping that American air strikes and naval gunfire and South Vietnamese shelling can make enough of a difference to save Hue.

This fire power could be seen and heard from Hue today. Almost continuous outgoing artillery rattled windows in the city, and the bombing by B 52's brought a rumbling from target areas 15 to 20 miles away. Clouds of black smoke from jet fighter-bomber strikes billowed from behind the hills on the edge of the city.

Because of the week's lull in the ground combat, a few of the people who fled Hue last week have returned to reconnoiter and try to do some business. But it is still essentially a deserted city. At the most, only 50,000 or 60,000 of the 350,000 residents and refugees who were here several weeks ago are still in Hue.

Surprisingly, basic city services continue to function. There are water and electricity and seemingly plenty of food for the shrunken population.

Some of the people now here are believed to be Vietcong infiltrators who have slipped in during the last week or so.

South Vietnamese screening operations, of doubtful effect, have been set in motion. For example, cycle ricksha drivers, who are considered sympathetic to the Communists, are now barred from the old walled section of the city, known as the Citadel, where the military command is situated.

But the ricksha drivers are not questioned when they deposit their passengers at the gates of the Citadel and they are allowed to move freely through the rest of the city.