

# Saigon Replaces Highlands Commander

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PLEIKU, South Vietnam, May 10—The Saigon Government today ordered an immediate change in the military command in the Central Highlands, where enemy pressure has been steadily mounting.

Lieut. Gen. Ngo Dzu was relieved of his command of the area, Military Region II, and flew to Saigon where no new assignment awaited him. He was replaced by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, who began a series of briefings here and in Kontum.

The relieved commander was scheduled to meet with President Nguyen Van Thieu tomorrow. General Toan commanded the Second Infantry Division for several years until he was named to his latest command as deputy for operations to the commander of Military Region I in the north.

John Paul Vann, the senior United States adviser, said he believed the change had come about because of pressure on the President from various members of the National Assembly. Under General Dzu, South Vietnamese forces have suffered a series of reverses, losing the northern three districts of Binh Dinh Province on the central coast and most of the north of Kontum Province, to the west.

## 'Like to See Scalp Fall'

"All distant critics like to see a scalp fall," Mr. Vann said. "It makes them feel better. I am aware of criticism by members of the National Assembly from Binh Dinh and Kontum Provinces of General Dzu's handling of the situation."

Asked if the change in command would result in a new policy in the Central Highlands, Mr. Vann shrugged, and said of General Toan, "He'll either be better or worse than General Dzu or maybe similar." He indicated that he felt General Dzu had been doing everything possible under the circumstances.

In any case, heavy pressure continued today on the ranger battalion outpost at Benhet, which was still gravely threatened. Enemy shelling and ground attacks also have been initiated against another ranger post at Pleimrong, to the south.

Mr. Vann said that the pressure on Pleimrong probably indicated that the enemy planned an attack from the southwest against Kontum. But possession of Pleimrong would also give the North Vietnamese a springboard for attacking Pleiku, the most important city in the area.

## 2 Reported Crucified

Mr. Vann said that intelligence reports had been received indicating that the North Vietnamese were applying a heavy hand in the newly occupied areas. He said that, according to one report, two French priests in the hamlet of Konhrieng were crucified last week, and that the family of an American-employed interpreter there had been executed.

In the district capital of Hoaian, in Binh Dinh Province, which fell two weeks ago, 600 males of military age were roped together and taken away to a "re-education center" in an enemy base area, he said.

Nevertheless, he said he hoped that most of the people in the area would stay, even under Communist control, since they will thus avoid the dangers of moving south through a bloody seesaw war.

Mr. Vann, while acknowledging the extreme gravity of the situation, said he felt that Kontum had a good chance of holding out for as long as eight weeks if necessary.

"If Kontum holds, the North

Vietnamese will be defeated in II Corps," Mr. Vann said, referring to Military Region II, the Central Highlands area. But he added that holding the city would also involve its inevitable destruction, since North Vietnamese artillery can be expected to level it over a period of weeks.

## Outposts Under Pressure

Mr. Vann said that the loss of Kontum would be a serious defeat. However, he said, even if all of Kontum and the northern three districts of Binh Dinh were lost, the number of people who would fall under Communist control would represent less than 10 per cent of the total population of Military Region II, which has more than three million people.

In northern Kontum province, Government forces still hold

five key ranger posts, although all of them, especially Benhet, are under increasing pressure.

Mr. Vann said he did not expect any major change in the enemy's battlefield plans in the next six months. Such plans, he said, include the cutting of roads, the taking of bases such as Tancanh, where the forward headquarters of the 22d Division was, and finally the taking of cities such as Kontum and Pleiku.

He said that, when the battle of Kontum begins, probably a week from now, the enemy would not have numerical superiority.

He said he was "delighted" that the North Vietnamese were attacking the border ranger camps which, he said, "were put there to be hit where the enemy can be killed."