

Push Into Delta by Fresh Enemy Division Worries U.S. Officers

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CANTHO, South Vietnam, May 23—A fresh North Vietnamese division has invaded South Vietnam in the lower Mekong Delta, American officers in the region reported today. They said that the new division posed a grave threat to an area from which most regular Government troops had been withdrawn to aid in the fighting north of Saigon.

Allied officials here in the center of the delta region are especially concerned because the new enemy force, which they say is the North Vietnamese First Division, appears to be headed for Chuongthien Province where, they say, the local South Vietnamese civilian and military leadership has long been paralyzed by incompetence, political infighting, poor strategy and an almost total unwillingness to carry the fight to the Communists.

Since the South Vietnamese Twenty-first Infantry Division and one regiment of the Ninth Division, which ordinarily are stationed in the area, were sent to Anloc, north of Saigon, in early April, Chuongthien has reported lost 79 outposts and 12 hamlets as well as 67 local officials to the Communists.

Although more than 5,000 Communist troops had already moved into Chuongthien this spring from other parts of the delta before the new infiltration of the First Division, American officers in the

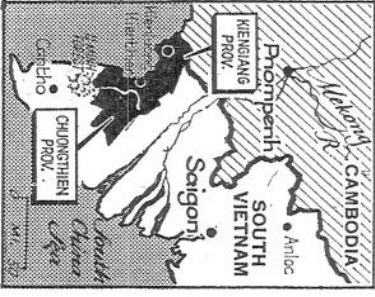
province say, Government forces have not initiated a single major action against them.

A Government regimental commander refused to get out of bed last night to order his men to help defend two outposts that were being overrun, the American officer reported, and local Regional Forces militia merely looked on while enemy troops blew up one of the swampy province's few main bridges.

The name of the South Vietnamese strategy is search and avoid, an American advisor in Chuongthien remarked yesterday, parodying the search-and-destroy strategy developed by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the former United States commander in Vietnam.

Lieut. Col. John R. Meese, the senior province adviser, said he believed that the North Vietnamese First Division — which in the last three days has been reported to have moved more than 30 miles into neighboring Kiengiang Province from Cambodia — would now try to join with the enemy force in Chuongthien and establish a Communist government for the whole Mekong Delta.

"They can overrun us any time they want to expend enough troops," Colonel Meese said in an interview. He expressed doubt, however, that the Communists could hold the provincial capital for long against American air power.



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Enemy troops have been moving from Cambodia to Kiengiang Province and heading for Chuongthien.

Since the enemy First Division infiltrated across the border into the grassy open spaces of Kiengiang Province along the Gulf of Siam, a small North Vietnamese unit has occupied Kienhuong, a district capital, and a large cement plant there.

Although the Government has brought up 11 companies of regional militia, an armored cavalry unit and two battalions of border rangers, the North Vietnamese have not been driven out.

American advisers with the Government troops report that the South Vietnamese are reluctant to meet the North Vietnamese in a frontal engagement. In the meantime the main enemy force appears to be con-

tinuing its advance toward Chuongthien, about 75 miles farther east. There are only a few local militia companies to block its path.

Chuongthien has long been considered the least secure province in the populous Mekong Delta, and has been ranked last or next to last for the whole country.

Despite official statements that the delta is "pacified," Colonel Meese said that Chuongthien was not.

"It's a cavity," he added, "because Saigon has neglected it for too many years, sending the worst people they've got down here. Vietnamese look on working in Chuongthien as a punishment post."

District Chief Criticized

He cited as an example the Kienthien district, where the South Vietnamese district chief, Lieut. Col. Cong Bang Thanh, has remained in his fortified command bunker since the district town was overrun on April 6.

Chuongthien's problems were heightened this week when the popular province chief, who was widely regarded as the only forceful leader in the province, was dismissed by the new commander of Military Region IV, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi.

Colonel Meese, who calls the former province chief a "patriot and dedicated man," described his ouster as a blatant political act carried out solely

for reasons of personal pique. The chief had quarreled with General Nghi, objecting to the Government's strategy of constructing hundreds of tiny outposts, the American adviser said.

General Nghi replaced him with a close personal friend, one of eight friends and former subordinate officers he has named as province chiefs among the delta's 16 provinces. General Nghi himself is considered a close friend of President Nguyen Van Thieu, and his wife's mother is a longtime associate of Mrs. Thieu.

'Defensive Mentality' Cited

The American advisers acknowledge that they too originally favored the concept of spreading outposts throughout the province to block Communist activity. But now they hope that the current fighting will discredit this strategy.

"It got the South Vietnamese in a defensive mentality, where all they did was sit in their bunkers and wait," Colonel Meese said. "The greatest weakness in our whole advisory effort is that we still can't get the Vietnamese to patrol aggressively."

Another cause of the Government's trouble in Chuongthien, the advisers said, is that the militia units that man the outposts are as much as one-third under their allotted strength. As a result, all troops are used for defense inside the outposts, with none left for patrols or night ambushes.