

Huge Quang Tri Massacre

By Holger Jensen

SAIGON — (AP) — Hundreds of South Vietnamese were killed trying to escape from Quang Tri City before its fall. The slaughter was indiscriminate, by definition a massacre.

But from evidence at the scene and in the aftermath, the action April 29-30 was not "a deliberate North Vietnamese army massacre of helpless civilians," as State Department spokesman John King described it.

The carnage suggested a cold-blooded North Vietnam-

ese resolve to stop all traffic on Highway 1, in callous disregard of civilian targets. But there was no evidence of a deliberate intent to single out the civilian refugees.

More than half the victims were South Vietnamese soldiers, and Washington's estimate of 1000 to 2000 dead seems inflated.

Interviews with survivors of the massacre and a visual inspection of the death site indicate 200 to 600 dead. Panic was a major contributing factor to the bloodshed.

News Analysis

North Vietnamese forces surrounded Quang Tri and cut Highway 1, its southern escape route to Hue, a week before the fall of the province capital.

South Vietnamese marines who were given the job of reopening the highway fought their way to within eight miles of Quang Tri.

Three convoys of South Vietnamese troops and civilians tried to flee southward

on Highway 1 between April 24 and 30. They were ambushed by North Vietnamese forces entrenched on both sides of the highway, four to eight miles southeast of Quang Tri.

This correspondent was with South Vietnamese marines who fought their way to the southernmost ambush site April 30. Wounded survivors who passed the advancing marines said their convoy had been hit by mines, mortars, rocket grenades and small-arms fire from North Vietnamese dug-

Doubted

in as close as 20 yards to the roadway.

According to the State Department, the North Vietnamese used antipersonnel artillery shells with fuses set for air bursts, which "shredded the refugee column" with sprays of shrapnel.

But frontline witnesses reported no air bursts before April 30 — any such would have killed troops of the enemy's own ambush force as well as the fleeing South Vietnamese.

Hundreds of wrecked vehicles and corpses littered a four-mile stretch of Highway 1. Four out of five vehicles were military.

One American here who says he contributed to the report asserts he clearly informed the State Department that 100 to 200 civilians had been killed in the ambushes. He could not explain how the figure had risen to 1000 to 2000 except to say: "There must have been a screwup somewhere along the line."