

Little Change in 10 Years

SAIGON — (AP) — With an Indochina cease-fire apparently near, the map of South Vietnam looks remarkably as it did 10 years ago.

Then the Viet Cong insurgents were running wild in the countryside and the Saigon government was struggling to keep populated areas under control and highways open.

Today, as then, most of the 850-mile border from the demilitarized zone to the Gulf of Siam is under the Communist led forces' control or in a jungle no man's land ignored by both sides.

Major cities, including all 44 province capitals, are firmly in Saigon government hands, but around some are concentrations of enemy forces who harass defenders, close roads and propagandize the local people as they did in the early '60s.

Most main highways are open most of the time, but any one can be closed at any moment, almost anywhere.

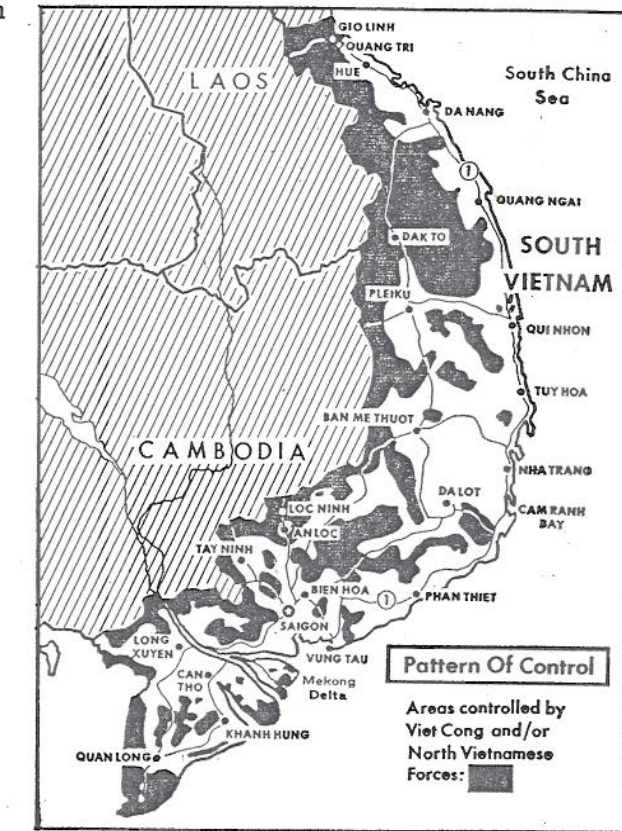
Strongholds

Around Saigon itself, long-time Communist strongholds like the Iron Triangle, War Zone C, the Saigon River corridor and the rubber plantations have again become operating bases for enemy forces after a few years of relative quiet.

In the event of a standstill cease-fire designed to freeze the forces of both sides in place at the moment of the truce, the question of who controls what is of crucial importance.

To attempt to measure the map is deceptive because of the vast areas of no contest and because the struggle continues to be more concerned with people than with land.

Despite its severe setbacks of the last seven



months and despite the appearance of the map, the South Vietnamese government still clearly holds the upper hand.

According to the latest figures from the U.S.-backed pacification program's computers, the government controlled 90.1 percent of the 19.1 million people at the end of September, with 7.2 percent in contested areas and 2 percent dominated by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

Reds Stronger

These figures represent a progressive improvement since June, when the Communists' military campaign peaked out on pacification charts with 557,000 people, almost 3 percent of the total, under enemy control.

Although having given back that one percentage point, the Communist side is in a far stronger position, strategically and politically, than it was when the offensive began March 30.

Some senior allied officials believe that while the enemy military drive did not achieve its over-all objectives, Hanoi and the Viet Cong probably are reasonably satisfied with their gains.

Some also believe that a cease-fire plan that required the North Vietnamese to withdraw from the South, as President Nguyen Van Thieu has demanded, would leave a Viet Cong force too weak to control much of what has been gained or to resist South Vietnamese efforts to quietly take it back.

Areas of strongest Communist influence are in the northern and western parts of northernmost Quang Tri Province and the mountains that run southward along the coast and provide sanctuaries for forays into populated lowlands. This is true despite the fact the South Vietnamese again control the provincial capital, Quang Tri.

In addition, the Communist side controls most of the central highlands region along the Laos-Cambodia-triborder area, most of the highland provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and chunks of Phu Bon and the coastal provinces of Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh and Phu Yen.

Mekong Delta

Areas lost by the government in the early days of the enemy's spring offensive and not retaken include the border areas northwest and north of Saigon. Although An Loc survived a siege that petered out after four months, Highway 13 remains a focal point and is still closed in spots.

Saigon's strongest grip remains in the Mekong Delta, where about a third of its people live.

Communist-led troops continue to hold their long-time coastal sanctuary in the U Minh "Forest of Darkness" and have been trying to return to their former base area in the "Seven Mountains" along the Cambodian border.

In Cambodia itself, recent official estimates are that the Communist-led forces, primarily local Khmer Rouge, control about 85 percent of the countryside and 55 percent of the seven million people.

As much as half of Laos is controlled or dominated by the Communist side.

