

Saigon's Losses Reported Heavy

Saigon

North Vietnamese troops have inflicted heavy losses on South Vietnamese forces in the Michelin rubber plantation northwest of Saigon, it was reported yesterday.

Fighting has raged there for several days despite talk of an early cease-fire in the capital, only 40 miles away.

As reports from the battle area were put together yesterday, there were strong indications that two South Vietnamese battalions suffered heavy casualties and relief forces were ambushed.

WOUNDED

Field reports said at least 80 South Vietnamese soldiers, some of them wounded, had drifted back from the battle area.

It was believed other South Vietnamese were trying to escape from the fighting that a senior military official called the biggest single battle in the Saigon region since An Loc was attacked last spring.

Military sources reported South Vietnamese casualties in the operation between January 13 and Sunday as 80 killed, 245 wounded and at least 40 missing. All the missing and most of the other casualties were members of two battalions that were surrounded and overrun, according to field reports.

LOSSES

Estimated Communist losses were 404 killed, including 325 in the last few days, mostly by aircraft.

South Vietnamese commanders, after a series of hastily called meetings, rejected a Viet Cong offer made Sunday to send unarmed ambulance helicopters to pick up 130 of the South Vietnamese wounded. Senior officers said the offer was a ploy to have air attacks in the area called off, giving the Communists time to withdraw or regroup.

Saigon spokesman Le

Trung Hien said the prisoners were offered as "bait" and claimed only about 30 South Vietnamese were missing in action as far as officials knew.

CONVOY

To the north of the plantation fighting, U.S. planes hit a convoy of North Vietnamese supply trucks moving southeast into South Vietnam from Cambodia, South Vietnamese sources said. The entire convoy, estimated at 100 trucks was knocked out.

Elsewhere, field reports said South Vietnamese rangers abandoned under heavy Communist pressure Sunday the Duc Co Special Forces camp in the central highlands near the Cambodian border.

South Vietnamese sources denied the reports, admitting only that there had been a fight at one of the camp's outposts Thursday.

The U.S. Command reported fighter-bombers flew 306 attacks against enemy positions in South Vietnam during the 24-hour period ended at 8 a.m. yesterday. In addition, B-52 bombers made 90 raids, most of them in northern Quang Tri province and the region northwest of Saigon.

Associated Press