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Expectation of Cease-Fire Brings Increase in Fighting

SAIGON, Jan. 16 (AP) — Increased fighting was reported Tuesday in contested areas throughout South Vietnam as Saigon's forces and the Communists battled to gain or hold territory in advance of a cease-fire.

U.S. air support for South Vietnamese ground forces continued despite the halt to all bombing and other offensive operations against the North. U.S. planes also continued hitting targets in Laos and Cambodia.

South Vietnamese military spokesmen reported a slight increase in Communist attacks in the 24 hours ending at 6 a.m. and there was also a significant increase in activity on the part of Saigon's forces, military sources said.

The sources said the South Vietnamese were mounting spoiling operations in an effort to keep Communist forces from gaining or holding land in anticipation of a cease-fire.

The Vietcong radio broadcast said government forces were engaged in "land grabbing operations" designed to increase the amount of territory controlled by the Thieu government in the event of an in-place cease-fire.

Heaviest fighting was reported in the Queson Valley, southwest of Danang and on the eastern edge of the Uminh Forest in the Mekong Delta.

Thirty-five Communist-led troops were reported killed in the Queson Valley fighting while 52 were killed in the delta fighting, according to Saigon's count.

There also was fighting in Quangtri Province just below the Demilitarized Zone, where South Vietnamese marines were trying to regain ground north of the Thachhan River. One such attempt was beaten back Sunday by North Vietnamese troops, according to delayed field reports.

In one major South Vietnamese army push in the Saigon River corridor 35 to 40 miles northwest of Saigon, ground contact was reported light with only scattered casualties on each side.

The U.S. command reported an Army AH-1 Cobra helicopter gunship was shot down in this area but both crewmen escaped with minor wounds.

U.S. B-52 bombers were used widely over the South in support of government troops. The heaviest raids were in the

area of the Michelin rubber plantation northwest of the capital, a long-time Communist staging area.

Sect Leader's Killing

Is Blamed on Vietcong

SAIGON, Jan. 16 (AP)—Police today blamed the assassination of the Cao Dai religious leader in November on a Communist plot to gain control of the 2 million member sect.

A police spokesman also said eight persons have been arrested in the bombing death of Nguyen Van Thanh, 65, a former general and leader of the Cao Dai.

Thanh, a vigorous anti-Communist, was killed when a plastic bomb and two hand grenades exploded early Nov. 22 in the bedroom of his home in Tayninh, 55 miles northwest of here.

Six of those arrested were presented to a news conference in Saigon today. One of them, Nguyen Van Cui, said he was ordered by Vietcong leaders in Tayninh to kill Thanh because of the religious leader's known anti-Communist position.