

A Surprise Red Offer On POWs

Associated Press

Saigon

The Viet Cong offered yesterday to free 130 wounded South Vietnamese captives in a "humanitarian gesture" under a 29-hour local cease-fire northwest of Saigon, but government field commanders apparently fear a trap.

South Vietnamese military sources said today that senior commanders are holding emergency conferences and keeping tabs on the situation with reconnaissance aircraft. Field commanders feel the Viet Cong made the proposal either to move supplies during a truce or in hopes of luring Saigon forces into an ambush, the sources added.

Elsewhere, field reports from the Mekong Delta told of a severe setback for South Vietnamese troops when a 150-man helicopter

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assault force landed in an ambush Saturday. Twenty were reported killed, 15 wounded and 103 were unaccounted for.

A Viet Cong Liberation Radio broadcast said the 130 wounded prisoners were captured Friday during heavy fighting near the big Michelin rubber plantation 40 miles northwest of Saigon.

South Vietnamese sources said the plantation region — where the cease-fire was proposed — is used as a staging area by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops. They estimated that the combined forces have more than 200 tons of war materials stockpiled there.

Sources said U.S. gunships spotted a North Vietnamese convoy of 100 or more trucks last night about 20 miles north of the Michelin plantation, midway between the proposed prisoner release site and the Cambodian border.

The sources reported that Thailand-based U.S. fighter-bombers were called in and destroyed or damaged 84 of the supply trucks. Secondary explosions and fires indicated that the trucks were loaded with ammunition or fuel, the sources said. Twenty-four anti-aircraft machine guns also were reported destroyed.

A spokesman for the U.S. Command said American aircraft were not striking in the area designated by the Viet Cong for the proposed prisoner release for fear of hitting wounded South Vietnamese prisoners.

In updated reports yesterday, the Saigon military command said 325 of its enemy were killed in the day-long fighting and listed South Vietnamese losses as 46 killed and 106 wounded.

The Viet Cong radio claimed its forces "wiped out" two battalions of the 5th South Vietnamese division and said in a late broadcast that they killed or captured 850 South Vietnamese, including many officers.

Based on available information from allied sources, these claims appeared exaggerated. Nevertheless, the sources left no doubt that the South Vietnamese units had taken severe losses in Friday's fighting.