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Heavy Government Toll Near Saigon Is Reported

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Tuesday, Jan. 23 (AP)—North Vietnamese troops have reportedly inflicted heavy losses on South Vietnamese forces in more than a week of fighting about 40 miles northwest of Saigon.

As fighting in the jungled area apparently ebbed yesterday, military sources said that 80 Government soldiers were killed, 245 wounded and at least 40 reported missing between Jan. 13 and last Sunday as South Vietnamese forces tried to move forward in the area.

Reports from the field said that at least 80 South Vietnamese soldiers, some of them wounded, had drifted back to rear lines.

One South Vietnamese officer, Capt. Phuong Van Tau, reached safety yesterday and reported that relief helicopters could not land in the battle area — the Michelin rubber plantation — because of heavy enemy fire.

South Vietnamese commanders, after a series of hastily called meetings, rejected a Vietcong offer made Sunday to send unarmed helicopters to pick up 130 of the South Vietnamese wounded. Senior officers said the offer was a tactic to have air strikes in the area called off.

A Saigon spokesman, Le Trung Hien, said that South Vietnamese observation planes and helicopters flying over the proposed release area "saw no prisoners and most of the planes were fired on."

Recent intelligence reports have shown a large enemy build-up in the jungle regions northwest of Saigon, apparently in preparation for another offensive.

To the north of the plantation fighting, American planes struck at a convoy of North Vietnamese supply trucks moving into South Vietnam from Cambodia, South Vietnamese sources said. The convoy, estimated at 100 trucks, was reported knocked out.

In other developments, reports from the field said that under heavy enemy pressure



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Rescue copters failed to reach Saigon troops near capital (1). Outpost at Duc Co (2) fell to foe. U.S. jets bombed targets near Quang Tri (3).

South Vietnamese rangers abandoned the Duc Co Special Forces camp in the Central Highlands near the Cambodian border Sunday. South Vietnamese sources denied the reports, saying only that there had been a fight at one of the camp's outposts Thursday.

The United States command reported that fighter-bombers flew 306 strikes against enemy positions in South Vietnam during the 24-hour period ending at 8 A.M. yesterday. In addition, B-52 bombers logged 30 missions, the bulk of them in northern Quang Tri Province and the region northwest of Saigon. Each mission presumably consists of three planes.