

Saigon's Forces Take a Beating

From News Dispatches

SAIGON, Jan. 22—North Vietnamese troops inflicted heavy losses on South Vietnamese forces over the weekend in the Michelin rubber plantation 40 miles northwest of Saigon.

As reports from the battle area were put together Monday, there were strong indications two South Vietnamese battalions were decimated and relief forces systematically ambushed as they moved forward.

A senior military official called it the biggest single battle in the Saigon region since AnLoc was attacked last spring.

Field sources said two North Vietnamese regiments were trying to make their way to the Saigon area to take land by force at the time of a ceasefire. But they were spotted by two South Vietnamese battalions.

Saigon commanders quickly poured reinforcements into the fight and the end result was 325 Communists killed, while the South Vietnamese lost 46 or 80 dead, according to different sources. The contact was broken Sunday as the government forces pulled back to allow B-52 bombers to hit the remaining Communists.

The two South Vietnamese battalions involved in the ini-

tial holding action were badly hurt. Radio Hanoi claimed "two whole battalions were annihilated."

Capt. Phung Van Thao, 30, a battalion commander who was wounded and made his way back to friendly lines Monday, said his unit "fell apart" under the heavy assault. He said the fighting was so close at one point that soldiers on the same side were shooting each other.

A sidelight to the fighting was that a number of wounded South Vietnamese were taken prisoner by the Communists, who were not prepared to hold them since

they were on a land-grab mission, field reports said. A few dozen were released with safe conduct passes signed by a Communist officer.

The Communists then offered to release 130 more if the South Vietnamese would send in unarmed helicopters and stop fighting in the area temporarily. Commanders rejected the offer as a "trick" to allow the North Vietnamese units time to withdraw.

For years, the French-owned plantation has been a sanctuary and staging area for Communist-led divisions. Because of frequent fighting in the area, rubber production has been sharply curtailed.