

VIETNAM FIGHTING IS SAID TO DECLINE

JAN 31 1973

Incidents Dwindle Despite Absence of Policing Units

—U.S. Spurs Pullout
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Wednesday, Jan. 31—The level of fighting in Vietnam reportedly dropped substantially yesterday, on the third day of the cease-fire, and American analysts said it appeared that combat was "slowly dying out."

"The fighting is definitely stopping," said one high American official.

It is stopping, however, without any supervisory mechanism in operation to monitor the cease-fire. Because of a procedural dispute, neither the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, composed of the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Vietcong, nor the International Commission of Control and Supervision, composed of Canada, Hungary, Indonesia and Poland, has started to function in any real way yet. [Page 00.]

As the fighting diminished, the pace of American military withdrawal quickened. The United States military command announced that Marine Aircraft Group 12, composed of 900 men, had "initiated its withdrawal from the Republic of South Vietnam." The Marine

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group is the only American air unit remaining in Vietnam.

The United States command also said other American military personnel were leaving the country at the rate of 300 to 400 a day.

The American analysts' evaluation was supported by other United States officials and by the figures issued yesterday afternoon by the South Vietnamese military authorities on what they called cease-fire violations by the Communists.

The South Vietnamese Government charged that Communist forces had committed 28 cease-fire violations during the six hours between 6 A.M. and noon yesterday.

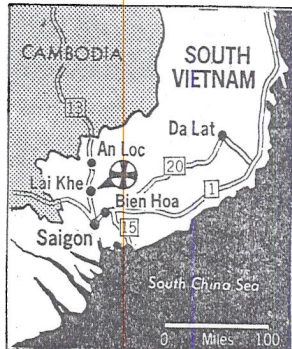
That was the lowest number reported by the Saigon authorities for any six-hour period since the cease-fire went into effect at 8 A.M. Sunday (7 P.M. Saturday, New York Time. It brought to 765 the total number of Communist violations charged by the Saigon Government since the cease-fire began.

There were no immediate countercharges by the Communists. On Monday the Vietcong command was reported to have said its men were adhering "scrupulously" to the terms of

the Paris peace agreement but that Saigon troops were repeatedly violating the cease-fire.

In addition to the reduction in the number of violations reported by the Government, there were several other signs that the cease-fire was approaching a point where it could be considered effective.

For one thing, the South Vietnamese reported that all but one of the highways they said were cut by Communist forces after the start of the cease-fire had now been reopened. As long as the roads remained cut—regardless of when they were cut—fighting continued as Government troops battled to reopen them.



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All roads in Saigon area were said to be reopened except Route 13, cut at Lai Khe (cross).

For another thing, the Government reported a steady drop in the number of hamlets around the country that were still being contested.

After the cease-fire began, the Saigon authorities said yesterday, more than 120 such Government-held hamlets were "penetrated" by Communist units. Yesterday, according to the Government, the number still contested was down to 49.

In essence, that is what the fighting has been all about during the last three days: the Saigon Government says that the Communists cut roads and penetrated hamlets after the cease-fire began, and Government units were ordered to fight to recover their lost positions.

It was impossible to determine whether these positions were actually lost to the Communists after the cease-fire began or during the heavy fighting of the 24 hours previous. Reports from the field, however, made it clear that in some instances, at least, the Government was trying to recover ground lost before the cease-fire went into effect.

An American analyst, discussing the decline in the fighting, declared that the small Communist units that had been fighting during the last three days were "running out of steam."

As a result, he said, the Gov-

ernment troops are gradually recovering their lost positions and the fighting is steadily subsiding.

The extent of the decline can be illustrated by the hourly average of cease-fire violations reported by the South Vietnamese Government.

During the first hours of the cease-fire, an average of 13 violations an hour were reported. In the next six hours, the hourly average was 23; then in the next 12 hours it was 20.

In the following 12 hours, the average was about 11 an hour; in the next 12 hours, it was about 13 an hour, and in the next six hours, ending at noon yesterday, the hourly average fell to four or five.

Regardless of whether these are actual violations, the reports provide about the only tangible guide to the over-all level of battlefield activity.

All of the action described by the Government yesterday was of a minor nature involving small units.

The Saigon military authorities said they knew of no instance thus far in which opposing commanders had met in the field to arrange informal cessations of hostilities, as the peace agreement protocols require.

However, a report transmitted to the South Vietnamese military command in Da Nang said Communist and Government commanders had met

Monday, shaken hands and chatted in the area around the Cua Viet base camp in Quang Tri Province, in the northernmost part of South Vietnam, which Government troops captured in the final hours before the ceasefire.

The incident was the first reported contact of this sort between opposing commanders since the truce went into effect.

The Government said that Route 1, which on Monday had been reported cut in several places, was reopened to traffic around noon yesterday. Route 20 between Da Lat and Saigon, a key highway for the hauling of fruit and vegetable supplies into the capital, was also reported open by the Saigon authorities, as was Route 15, which runs south from Saigon.

The only road that remained cut by the Communists, according to South Vietnamese military authorities, was Route 13, which they said was severed in the area around Lai Khe, about 25 miles north of Saigon.

Marine Aircraft Group 12, which the United States military command said had begun leaving Vietnam Monday, came to the country last May 17 and was based at Bien Hoa, about 15 miles northeast of Saigon.

The air group flew A-4 Skyhawk jets in close support of ground troops in South Vietnam.