

Drop in Vietnam Fighting Stirs Cautious Optimism

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Wednesday, Feb. 21 — American analysts expressed cautious optimism yesterday about a reported drop in fighting and said it might indicate that an appeal by the Four-Party Joint Military Commission was producing some results.

One analyst said the reported decline "could be related" to the commission's appeal Saturday for an immediate end to all hostilities in South Vietnam.

But he and others warned that the decline involved only a single day's action and that it was, as one put it, "too soon to draw any firm conclusion."

Earlier Declines Noted

"We've seen such declines before," he said in a reference to the period about 10 days after the cease-fire, when fighting dropped to its lowest level since the truce went into effect on Jan. 28.

A Saigon military source described the decline in fighting, illustrated by the number of battlefield incidents reported by the Government, as "not significant."

According to Government reports, the number of Communist violations of the cease-fire, which the Government uses as an indicator of battle activity, declined yesterday by about 30 per cent.

Most of the action reported yesterday was small and most

of the casualties were light.

But the Government said that in one clash near Duc Hue, a district capital in Hau Nghia Province near Saigon, 34 Communist soldiers were killed and five Government soldiers were wounded.

In another fight reported by the Government, it said 27 Communist and two Government soldiers were killed near Hieu Xuang, a district capital in coastal Pou Yen Province.

The Government charges that the Communists have committed more than 4,000 violations of the cease-fire. Saigon says that more than 7,470 Communist soldiers and more than 1,280 Government soldiers have died in the fighting since the cease-fire.

The Communists say that Saigon's troops have violated the truce more than 2,000 times.

Repression Charged

A Hanoi broadcast yesterday charged that the Saigon authorities had engaged in extensive police repression since the cease-fire.

They said that in Hue, the police launched 500 "police operations" and made "thousands of arrests" of suspected Communist sympathizers between Jan. 29 and Feb. 4.

The broadcast also asserted that the Government had refused to release "more than 16,000" military prisoners "under the pretext that they were voluntary returnees."

The Government, meanwhile,

announced that it had released 200 more Communist war prisoners, bringing the total to 6,500. Saigon says a total of 830 Government soldiers have been released from Communist captivity.

A Saigon spokesman said that at yesterday's meeting of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission's subcommittee on prisoners, the Saigon representative proposed an immediate new round of prisoner releases to cover 7,000 military prisoners held by Saigon.

According to the Saigon spokesmen, the Communist representatives on the subcommittee rejected the proposal and suggested instead that the release of civilian detainees begin before the next round of prisoner exchanges.

"We will continue to demand that the military prisoners should be released first," the Saigon military spokesman said.

According to the Government spokesman, Saigon has given the Communists a list of 500 civilians it holds and the Communists have given Saigon a list of 200 it holds. Each side asserts that the figures of the other should be much higher.

Vietcong General Visits

In a rare appearance in downtown Saigon, Gen. Tran Van Tra, the chief of the Vietcong delegation to the Joint Military Commission, paid a call yesterday on the Indonesian delegation to the international commission of control and supervision.

General Tra spent about an hour with the Indonesians at their downtown hotel then left, waving to a crowd of several hundred who had gathered to see him.

The day before, Gen. Le Quang Hoa, the chief of the North Vietnamese delegation to the military commission, visited the Hungarian delegation of the control commission in downtown Saigon.

On the political front, the South Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Tran Van Lam, left for Paris yesterday to attend the international peace conference.

Site to Be Discussed

While there, he is expected to meet with Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, the Foreign Minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, and will, according to a Foreign Ministry spokesman here, propose that future political discussions between her government and Saigon be held either in Singapore or Jakarta.

The Saigon Government had been seeking to hold such talks, aimed at creating a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord to supervise eventual elections in South Vietnam, in Saigon. The Communists are understood to prefer Hue as the site.

Yesterday a Foreign Ministry spokesman said the talks had to be held in an atmosphere of "serenity, neutrality and free from public opinion pressure." He said Singapore and Jakarta "meet those conditions."