

BUILD-UP BY HANOI REPORTED IN AREA NORTH OF SAIGON

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Communists Said to Send Weapons Into Tay Ninh—130-mm. Gun Noted

MAJOR DRIVE FORESEEN

Saigon General Says When U.S. Is Out, North May Risk an Offensive

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TAY NINH, South Vietnam, March 16—South Vietnamese and American officials say that Communist forces are engaged in a major build-up of supplies and military equipment in this critical border province northwest of Saigon.

The officials say that the Communists have also introduced some advanced weapons never before seen in the area, including Soviet-made 130-mm. artillery with a range of nearly 17 miles.

In addition, South Vietnamese officers reported, the Communists have recently introduced in the Tay Ninh area the SA-7 heat-seeking missile and the AT-3 guided missile. Both are small weapons carried and fired by one man. An SA-7 recently brought down a helicopter north of Tay Ninh, killing six South Vietnamese and fragments of AT-3 missiles were found at an outpost that took heavy shelling three weeks ago.

In Wartime, an Attack

"If this was before the cease-fire and the VC were concentrating troops and new weapons the way they are now, I'd say they were planning an attack," said Col. Le Van Thien, the province chief here. Then

he added with a touch of sarcasm, "But with the cease-fire we don't know what they are planning to do."

According to the Paris cease-fire accord, both sides in the conflict may replace military equipment on a piece-by-piece basis. The introduction of new weapons or the addition of men and equipment is prohibited.

Earlier this week American officials in Washington and Saigon disclosed that the Communists had been moving large amounts of matériel toward South Vietnam from the North.

Equipment Reaches Tay Ninh

And yesterday President Nixon expressed concern over the build-up, warning Hanoi not to "lightly disregard" his words. This was taken as a threat to renew bombing if the troop and supply movement continued.

In interviews yesterday and today, high-ranking South Vietnamese officers said that a good deal of the supplies from the North had already reached Tay Ninh, which lies at the

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southern end of the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Brig. Gen. Le Van Tu, who commands South Vietnam's 25th Infantry Division, estimated yesterday that as many as 100 Soviet-made T-54 tanks had arrived in Tay Ninh in the last month.

The northern part of the Province has been a Communist sanctuary since the earliest days of the war. It has served as a staging area for supplies and troops entering South Vietnam, many of the soldiers then following the natural routes south toward Saigon.

But the traffic during the last month has been heavier than during most comparable periods last year, General Tu said.

"Since the cease-fire it's been easy for them to move," the general continued. "They don't have to be afraid of air strikes and artillery now."

Intelligence officials in Saigon estimate that the Communists have moved a full battalion of 12 130-mm. guns into the province northwest of Saigon, and they say that this is the first time the weapon has been seen south of the Central Highlands.



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Communist supply effort was reported in Tay Ninh Province (shaded).

Some of the officers here said they believed that some of the 130-mm. guns were in Binh Long and Binh Duong Provinces to the east and south, in addition to Tay Ninh.

General Tu said he had also received indications that the Communists, for the first time, had brought 122-mm. howitzers with a range of about seven miles into Tay Ninh Province. He said he had no estimate of how many of these guns were in the province.

Radar-Guided Antiaircraft

Intelligence officials in Saigon said that the Communists had also recently sent from North Vietnam a number of radar-guided, twin 57-mm. anti-aircraft guns mounted on the chassis of T-54 tanks. But officers in the field said that they had found no evidence of any of these guns in Tay Ninh.

South Vietnamese officials say that elements of two North Vietnamese divisions—the Seventh and the Ninth—are believed to be operating in Tay Ninh. But they believe that most of the Communist troops now in the province are logistical and other support personnel. They are unable to say with confidence how many Communist soldiers are facing them.

Hard intelligence on the Communists' intentions is lacking. But General Tu thinks that at the rate they are building up, they could be ready for a division-size attack early in April. The Communists will be waiting, he continued, that a

the United States withdraws all its troops and has all its prisoners of war back, President Nixon will be much less likely to order American bombers back to Vietnam.

Would the Communists not be reluctant to flout world opinion with such a clear violation of the cease-fire as a major attack?

In the view of one Western European diplomat who thinks that an attack is likely in April, the Communists might well hope that a major offensive was simply repaying the South Vietnamese Government for countless small-scale violations of the peace agreement.

In Tay Ninh city, the provincial capital, people are saying that the Communists have been spreading the word that they plan to take the city soon. "It may be just bravado," an American remarked, "but they're saying it."

General Tu said he thought that the cease-fire created a much more difficult situation for the South Vietnamese than the truce agreement of 1954 did.

"Then the 17th Parallel was established as a clear line between North and South," he said. "They were on one side and we were on the other. But now the Communists are everywhere—here in Tay Ninh and even in Saigon in Camp Davis. Now we have to sleep with the leopard. And this is much more dangerous."