

# Saigon Begins Big Attack To Free a Besieged Post

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Thursday, March 22—The Saigon military command said yesterday that it had opened a major attack to break the siege of a small outpost surrounded by Communist troops for more than a week. A military spokesman said the attack to relieve the militia outpost at Rach Bap, about 22 miles north of Saigon, involved more than a regiment of troops supported by tanks, aircraft and artillery. A South Vietnamese regiment is composed of about 2,500 men.

## Pleas to Both Units

The announcement of the "relief operation," which had been threatened for several days, dramatized the nearly total impotence of the cease-fire peace-keeping machinery to prevent continued fighting in South Vietnam.

[The Communist delegations announced that they would release the final group of 138 American prisoners in Hanoi on Saturday and Sunday, The Associated Press reported from Saigon, Page 13.]

Both the Four-Party Joint Military Commission and the International Commission of Control and Supervision—the two peace-keeping bodies created by the Paris agreement of Jan. 27—were asked by Saigon to intervene to end the fighting at Rach Bap and another

besieged outpost about 30 miles further north.

The Joint Military Commission was paralyzed when the North Vietnamese and Vietcong members denied any Communist violations of the cease-fire at the two outposts and refused to take any action to halt the fighting there.

The question was then passed to the control commission, which consists of Canada,

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# Saigon Begins a Major Attack To End Siege of Small Outpost

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Hungary, Indonesia and Poland, and on Monday it agreed to investigate the two situations. Investigating teams were set up at Bien Hoa and Cu Chi, ready to fly to the two outposts to begin their investigations. But at the last minute, according to sources close to the commission, the Hungarians and Poles refused to go, reportedly because they were unable to obtain assurances from the Vietcong that the teams would be able to enter the area safely. Saigon had meanwhile warned that unless the commission acted to end the two sieges, the South Vietnamese Army would act on its own.

Yesterday, with the peace-keeping machinery stymied, the Saigon military command said it had started its "relief operations" at Rach Bap two days ago, a fact that suggests that Saigon did not wait very long for the commission to react.

A Saigon military spokesman said the attack at Rach Bap was its second largest "relief operation" since the cease-fire started Jan. 28. The only larger one, he said, was at Sa Huynh, a small coastal town seized by the Communists when the cease-fire began and recaptured by Saigon a few weeks later.

In this case, too, the peace-keeping machinery failed to prevent heavy fighting, which ended only when the town had been retaken by Saigon.

## Second Attack Expected

The Saigon spokesman said the Government had not yet begun a "relief operation" at the second besieged outpost, at Tong Le Chan, but he gave the impression that such an attack could be expected soon.

Minutes after the announcement of the "relief operation" by the South Vietnamese, a three-hour meeting of the control commission ended on the other side of Saigon and Michel Gauvin, Canada's delegate, emerged looking tired and irritated. He said the commission had failed to act on the Rach Bap and Tong Le Chan cases despite Canada's demand for "action—immediate action."

"We are not getting anywhere in getting satisfactory answers to our questions about

why the investigation is not proceeding," he said. The failure of the commission to move in the two cases, he said, "amounts in the end to painting a rather pessimistic picture of the commission's ability to perform its role."

"We didn't come here to observe a war," he said. "We came to observe a cease-fire."

While Mr. Gavin avoided blaming Poles or Hungarians directly for the delay, other commission sources were less judicious.

According to one, Canada had urged at yesterday's meeting that the investigation of the outpost situations proceed immediately, but the Poles and Hungarians "talked up and down and sideways" without taking any action.

## Obstacles and Frustrations

Earlier in the day, another Western source described the commission situation bleakly as a series of "obstacles, frustrations and snags."

In another development, a Saigon Foreign Ministry spokesman renewed charges of continued infiltration of men and weapons into South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese.

He said that by the end of February, North Vietnam had sent 50,000 men, 300 tanks and hundreds of artillery weapons down the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. Most of the troops and equipment, he said, were already in South Vietnam.

The infiltration proved, he said, that "the Communists have not yet given up their aim of conquering South Vietnam by force." The spokesman said the infiltration constituted "a threat to peace" in Vietnam and he warned that Saigon "reserves the right" to protect its territory from further attack.

Amid all the conflict and turbulence, the exchange of Vietnamese prisoners proceeded with surprising smoothness. Saigon said 1,200 Communist prisoners were released yesterday in exchange for 630 Government soldiers. Saigon has said it expects to complete the prisoner exchange before the March 28 deadline.