

A DISTRICT CAPITAL IS LOST BY SAIGON

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Town Southwest of Da Nang
Overrun — Chances of Its
Recapture in Doubt

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 7 — Communist troops overran a Government district capital in the hills southwest of Da Nang this morning, the Saigon military command announced.

The town of Thuong Duc, 24 miles southwest of Da Nang, came under heavy shelling yesterday afternoon, the command said, then was engulfed in an all-night battle that ended this morning in hand-to-hand combat in the streets. At 11 A.M. radio contact was lost.

This made the second district capital—equivalent to a county seat—taken by the Communists since the cease-fire was signed in Paris in January last year. The other—kien Duc, 100 miles northeast of Saigon—was lost in December, then retaken three days later.

But experienced military men here expressed doubt that the Government could recapture Thuong Duc as quickly, if at all. It lies in a narrow valley flanked by hills that provide only one route of access for Government troops—a road from the east that would require a frontal assault against the North Vietnamese forces.

The Question of Supplies

Furthermore, the Communist's newly built road network from North Vietnam runs to within nine miles of Thuong Duc, where it connects with a Government road that winds along the river valley into the town from the west. This makes resupply easy for the Communists, some military experts noted.

A spokesman for the Vietcong's delegation in Saigon said that no report had been received yet on the fate of Thuong Duc, so there could be no comment.

The loss of the town was the most serious Government defeat since heavy fighting erupted in the area in mid-July. Although there had been virtually no severe combat there since the cease-fire was signed, the North Vietnamese suddenly took two Government positions, moved troops eastward toward Route 1, attacked several district towns and fired rockets at Da Nang air base, from which fighter planes were conducting air strikes.

Meanwhile, 100 miles to the south, the communists have cut Route 1, the country's vital north-south link.

Some foreign military observers said they believed the Communist attacks have been logical military responses to the Government's sweeps through Vietcong-held areas in various parts of the country, including the Que Son Valley, a long-contested region southeast of Thuong Duc.

Since the cease-fire, for example, the Government has retaken a number of towns along the central coast that had been in Vietcong hands since their 1972 offensive. Some military men think the Communist attacks now are aimed at keeping the Government army so busy that it must abandon such sweeps.

"The Government has got to go out into these valleys, like Que Son, to gain farmland," one foreign military observer explained. "Some areas they want to resettle are right in the middle of Communist base areas."

Saigon has put a top priority on its effort to move all its refugees from camps onto resettlement sites where they have land to farm, and some resettlement areas have reportedly come under Communist attack.

Recent intelligence reports indicate the the Vietcong are somewhat concerned about the sparse population in much of their territory, and some diplomats here said they believed the recent attacks may be partly an effort to take populated farmland, then invite or force civilians to move into Vietcong-controlled areas.

There are unconfirmed reports that during the fighting southwest of Da Nang, the Communists have abducted thousands of civilians. There have also been accusations that the Government—contrary to the Paris agreement's guarantee of freedom of movement—has refused to allow civilian refugees to return to Vietcong-held villages if they so choose.

The diplomatic community in Saigon is inclined to discount the Government's contention that a general offensive is under way, preferring the assessment that North Vietnam is playing a waiting game, concentrating on its own reconstruction, but grinding away at the South Vietnamese Government in the hope that it will ultimately collapse.

U.S. Is Concerned

WASHINGTON, Aug 7 (Reuters)—A White House spokesman said today the United States remained concerned about communist attacks in South Vietnam and urged that violations of the cease-fire accord be halted.