



The President's Daily Brief

March 31, 1975

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SOUTH VIETNAM

Political repercussions in Saigon are mounting. Sentiment for removing President Thieu is likely to escalate as the dimensions of the government collapse in the northern half of the country and the present communist threat sink in.

At the moment, Thieu's greatest strength appears to be the absence of a readily apparent alternate leadership within either the military or the political opposition. The President's position has nevertheless been seriously, and perhaps irreparably, damaged as a result of the decisions that set in train the massive and disorganized government retreats in the northern military regions.

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disclosed fairly widespread criticism of Thieu, especially from the more senior officers. Dissatisfaction is certain to be substantially higher among commanders and officers farther north.

Some fairly close associates of the President,

are deeply pessimistic over both the general military situation and Thieu's ability to remain in power.

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Thieu must step down in favor of a new government prepared to reach a political solution with the communists.

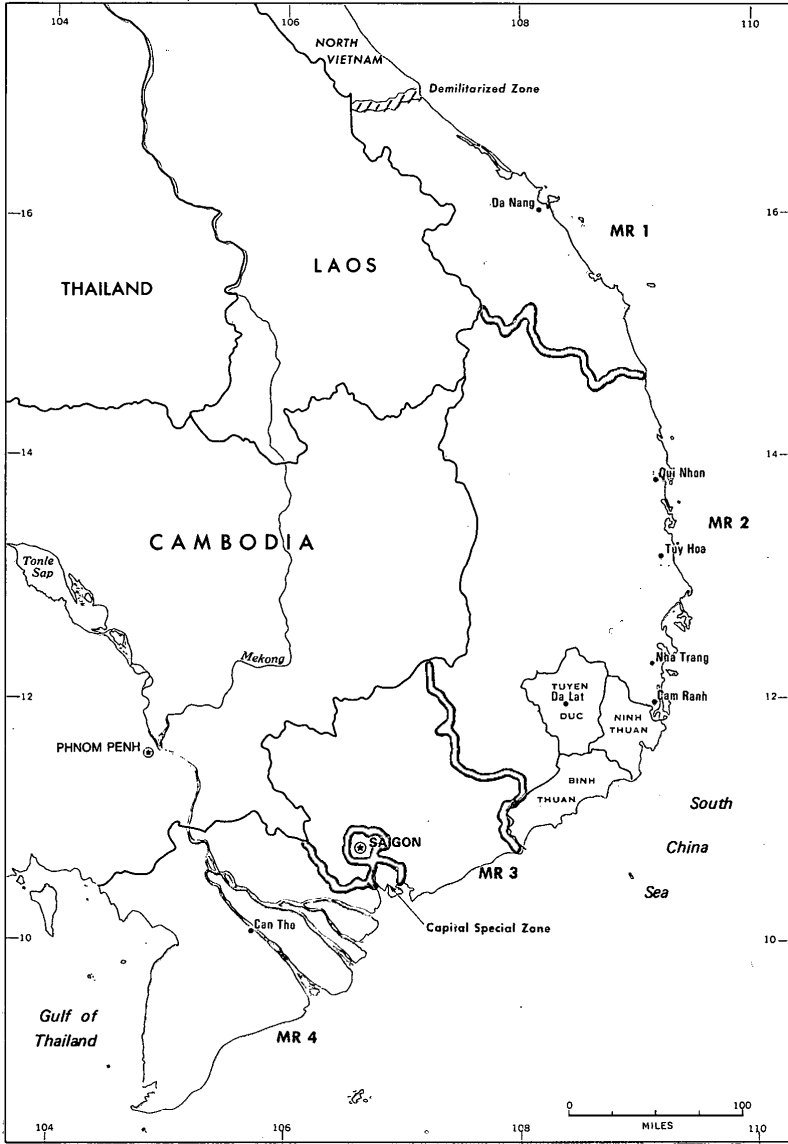
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The South Vietnamese Senate reportedly will soon consider a motion asking Thieu to resign and another that censures the President for his conduct of the war. There appears to be a good chance that at least the latter will carry.

Although a number of prominent political opposition leaders have stepped up their demands for Thieu's departure and the formation of a new "government of national union," there is little agreement either on a successor for Thieu or on policies that a new government might adopt. Widespread or

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enthusiastic backing appears to be lacking for former vice president Ky, General Duong Van "Big" Minh, or any other potential opposition rallying point. For the time being, the political opposition will probably have little choice but to remain on the sidelines, watching for some sign of a significant move within the military to arrange Thieu's resignation or ouster.

Military Situation

An estimated 16,000 government troops, including much of the marine division, have been evacuated from Da Nang and the northern provinces to Cam Ranh, where they are being regrouped and refitted before assignment to potential battlefronts in the southern half of the country.

General Truong, the Military Region 1 commander, has joined his troops, but his future plans or assignment are unknown. President Thieu has blamed Truong for the loss of Da Nang, saying that Truong disobeyed orders to defend the city to the end.

There is no accurate estimate of how many civilians have been evacuated from Da Nang, but the number probably runs to more than 50,000. The North Vietnamese closed the port yesterday by firing rockets at boats in the Da Nang harbor. Many people are stranded on offshore islands and in small boats along the coast.

Communist successes in cutting Route 1 along the coastal strip in both the northern and central provinces have cut off the refugee flow. Many thousands of displaced persons continue to clog Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh as well as smaller towns along the coast.

The South Vietnamese are desperately trying to control the rapidly slipping situation in the seven remaining provinces of Military Region 2. On Saturday, the military command structure was reorganized into four separate commands in order to better defend the areas still held by the government. Last-minute organizational changes, however, are unlikely to reverse the current battlefield situation.

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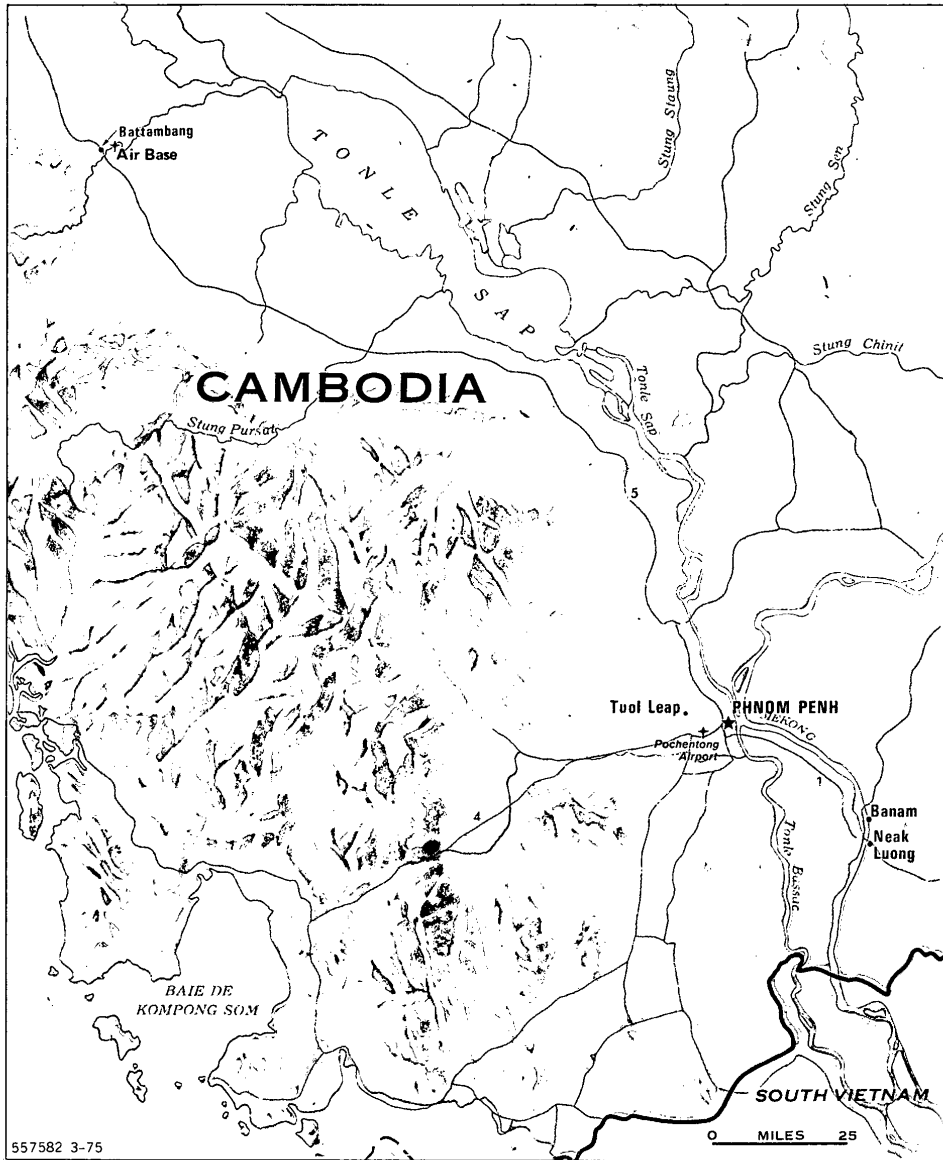
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Despite sustaining some heavy losses, the North Vietnamese 3rd Division is moving dangerously close to Qui Nhon, and the South Vietnamese airborne brigade was forced to pull back from its blocking position northwest of Nha Trang yesterday. Commanders in Military Region 2 are now concerned about a growing communist threat to the southeastern provinces of Binh Thuan, Ninh Thuan, and Tuyen Duc--where the city of Da Lat is located.

No major fighting has been reported in the provinces close by Saigon or in the delta over the weekend. Fears are rising, however, that new communist pressure may soon be applied to the two regions, and that the collapse of military and civilian morale that occurred in the two northern regions may spread south.

The communists are continuing to concentrate their forces in the northern and central delta provinces, especially around the region's major city of Can Tho. The communists can now also move several divisions to the provinces north of Saigon. Early major communist attacks in these two areas would make it difficult for the government to consolidate and redeploy its forces for the defense of military regions 3 and 4.

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CAMBODIA

US airlift operations into Pochentong resumed on Saturday following a 24-hour suspension. The insurgents meanwhile continued their rocket and artillery attacks.

Over the weekend at least 44 107-mm. rockets and two 105-mm. howitzer rounds landed in the vicinity of the airport. A communist headquarters in the Phnom Penh area yesterday requested immediate delivery of 200 howitzer rounds for use against the airfield.

The communist attacks on Pochentong are not only disrupting the airlift, but are also interfering with government air force operations. Maintenance has been slowed, and shrapnel damage has sidelined a number of aircraft--six on Saturday alone.

The government's operation west of Pochentong to retake Tuol Leap and to push the insurgents out of rocket and artillery range has been blocked.

Northwest of Phnom Penh, government forces stabilized the situation after the insurgents failed to exploit a significant break in the capital's defense perimeter.

The insurgents cut the enclave at Neak Luong and Banam in half over the weekend. The communists have massed 6,000 to 7,000 troops against some 4,000 government troops. Should Neak Luong and Banam fall, the insurgents would probably send many of these troops to Phnom Penh's southern defense perimeter.

In the far northwest, communist forces have moved even closer to the provincial capital of Battambang and now pose a direct threat to the city itself and the nearby enclave.

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ARAB STATES - ISRAEL

The Egyptian multi-service communications exercise "Abu Rudays" began on Saturday, and elements from each of the armed forces appear to be participating. The exercise is scheduled to continue through April 3.

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EGYPT

In his speech to the nation on Saturday, President Sadat set forth a policy of surprising moderation, apparently designed to demonstrate his continued desire for peace. He also signaled some limits to his patience.

Sadat deliberately played down militant themes. He said he had decided to extend the UN Emergency Force mandate and to reopen the Suez Canal by June because of his concern about the reaction of "the world." He said he had rejected the angry and emotional response to the breakdown of disengagement negotiations that most expected from him. He explained that he believed that Egypt could not be responsible for confronting the "international community" with a sudden crisis by not renewing the UN mandate when it expires on April 24.

Using a similar rationale for reopening the canal, Sadat said that Egypt cannot deprive the "peoples of the world" of an important trade route when the canal had been closed through "no fault" of theirs. Sadat issued a warning, however, in both instances. He said that, in agreeing to extend the UN mandate for three months rather than the usual six, he wanted to make clear that there is a limit to both time and patience. He emphasized that Egypt is able to protect the canal and will use its "deterrent capability" if Israel infringes on either the canal or the territory adjacent to it.

Sadat avoided strident recriminations against Israel, speaking in a low-key fashion of Israel's "weakness" rather than of its "intransigence," but he seemed intent on demonstrating that Egypt is more interested in peace than is Israel. He spoke repeatedly of the need to explore all avenues.

Sadat undoubtedly intended that his moderation would put a burden on Israel both to move toward peace and to refrain from military provocation. A

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reopened canal could restrain both sides from renewing warfare, and the decision to extend the UN mandate will place equal obligation on each side to abide by the cease-fire.

Israeli officials have reacted cautiously to Sadat's decisions. Despite Prime Minister Rabin's negative reaction to the short extension of the UN mandate, other spokesmen have noted that the moderate tone of the speech leaves the door open for continued dialogue.

Sadat will almost certainly face criticism from some Arab states. There is no indication that he cleared his decision on the UN mandate with Syria, whose mandate on the Golan Heights expires at the end of May. Indeed, Damascus radio stated a few hours before Sadat's speech that Egypt and Syria had decided not to renew the mandates unless "tangible" progress had been made toward achieving Israeli withdrawal. The leader of the Syrian-controlled Saiqa fedayeen organization said publicly on Saturday before Sadat spoke that extension of the mandate would amount to "surrender to Zionist blackmail."

Sadat clearly indicated in his speech that he anticipates criticism from the Arabs, but intends to ignore it as long as he can. He apparently feels that his rejection last week of Israel's terms for non-belligerency proves his dedication to the Arab cause sufficiently to permit some independence. In his speech, he frequently said that Egypt must make its own decisions.

He also signaled, however, that he cannot maintain Egypt's independence indefinitely. He said that Egypt will submit a plan of action to the Arab summit scheduled for June, which he "hopes" will be agreed upon. Sadat has proved at past summits unable to retain a free hand with his Arab allies. The new July date for the expiration of the UN mandate follows closely after the summit.

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SUEZ CANAL

If the Suez Canal is reopened as early as June, the waterway will have less capacity than it had before it was closed in mid-1967. Night transits will be impossible and day operations curtailed because new navigation lights and systems for ship monitoring and communications are unlikely to be installed before October.

Ships using the waterway during the first months after it reopens will be limited to drafts of 35 feet, rather than 38 feet permitted before the canal was closed.

The Canal Authority has worked out a temporary traffic control system and has trained a cadre of pilots. In a dry run during the first week in March, operations reportedly went smoothly. Before June, the British are to carry out a precautionary final sweep for explosives. This check is intended to reassure potential users and to dispose of any explosives thrown into the waterway by Egyptian land forces who cleared the shoreline.

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SAUDI ARABIA

Khalid, the new Saudi monarch, has decided to follow the precedent established by King Faysal, and will retain the titles of prime minister and foreign minister.

The US embassy in Jidda believes, however, that Crown Prince Fahd, who was advanced from second to first deputy prime minister on Saturday, will in fact exercise the functions of prime minister.

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[redacted] Khalid will, [redacted], direct the council of ministers to act under Fahd's instructions and report directly to Fahd.

Khalid made several other top-level personnel decisions on Saturday. National guard commander Prince Abdallah, generally regarded as a strong backer of Khalid [redacted] was designated second deputy prime minister.

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Perhaps to balance this, Prince Nayif--a younger full brother of Fahd--was advanced from vice minister of interior to minister of state for interior affairs. Nayif will run the ministry on a day-to-day basis, although Fahd will officially keep the ministerial title. In something of a surprise, Saud ibn Faysal, 33-year-old son of the late King, was named minister of state for foreign affairs. This post has been held by an acting minister since the death of Omar Saqqaf in 1974. Prince Saud has been oil minister Yamani's deputy. The three new appointees will be full members of the council of ministers.

Although the structure of the Saudi government seems set for now--Khalid has asked other ministers to remain at their posts--there is likely to be a great deal of maneuvering for power within the hierarchy.

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Meanwhile, the government announced on March 30 that the assassin of King Faysal was sane at the time of the shooting. He will be tried according to Muslim law.

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NOTE

Turkey's Justice Party leader Suleyman Demirel is moving toward forming a right-of-center coalition government.

If President Koruturk, who does not care for Demirel, does accept the proposed government, Demirel will still have to submit a governmental program to parliament for a vote of confidence. At best, the coalition could muster a bare majority. Demirel would then have to prove to the Turkish military that he can rule effectively. The military forced him to resign in 1971 because of his inability to control political violence.

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