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Intelligence Memorandum

The Tactical Situation in South Vietnam's Four Military Regions

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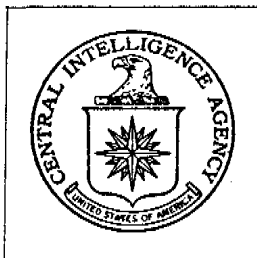
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June 17, 1974

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June 17, 1974

THE TACTICAL SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM'S FOUR MILITARY REGIONS

Summary

Despite periodic fighting in many parts of South Vietnam since the January 1973 cease-fire, relatively little population and territory have changed hands. Saigon still controls the vast majority of the people as well as most of the economically important land. The Communists hold a fairly wide swath of territory along the western portion of the country, but they control only some 5 percent of the country's population.

Both sides have rebuilt and augmented their combat forces. Although the Communists have narrowed the gap in capabilities between themselves and the South Vietnamese, the government still retains an overall edge in the balance of forces. The South Vietnamese still have far more combat troops than the Communists, but the government's edge in firepower assets has been reduced. The Communists have moved in large numbers of tanks and field artillery and shifted a number of air defense units into the country from Laos and North Vietnam. In the past few months, South Vietnam has lost a number of aircraft to these defenses and, in some areas, South Vietnamese pilots have started flying at higher, safer altitudes. If the losses continue to mount, Saigon could be forced to restrict further its air operations over heavily defended Communist territory, giving the Communists a significant advantage in these areas.

The Communists also have improved their logistic position throughout the country, and they are estimated to have enough supplies on hand in South Vietnam to support their forces for at least 18 months of heavy fighting.

The South Vietnamese, too, have improved their supply system since assuming the task of distribution from the US, but they still have significant shortcomings. Government forces have had to conserve supplies, and munitions stockpiles are critically low in several places. South Vietnamese troops guarding Hue, for example,

This Memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence of the Central Intelligence Agency and has been informally coordinated with working-level analysts of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the Department of State.

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probably would run short of ammunition in a few weeks if they expended ammunition at a rate comparable to 1972.

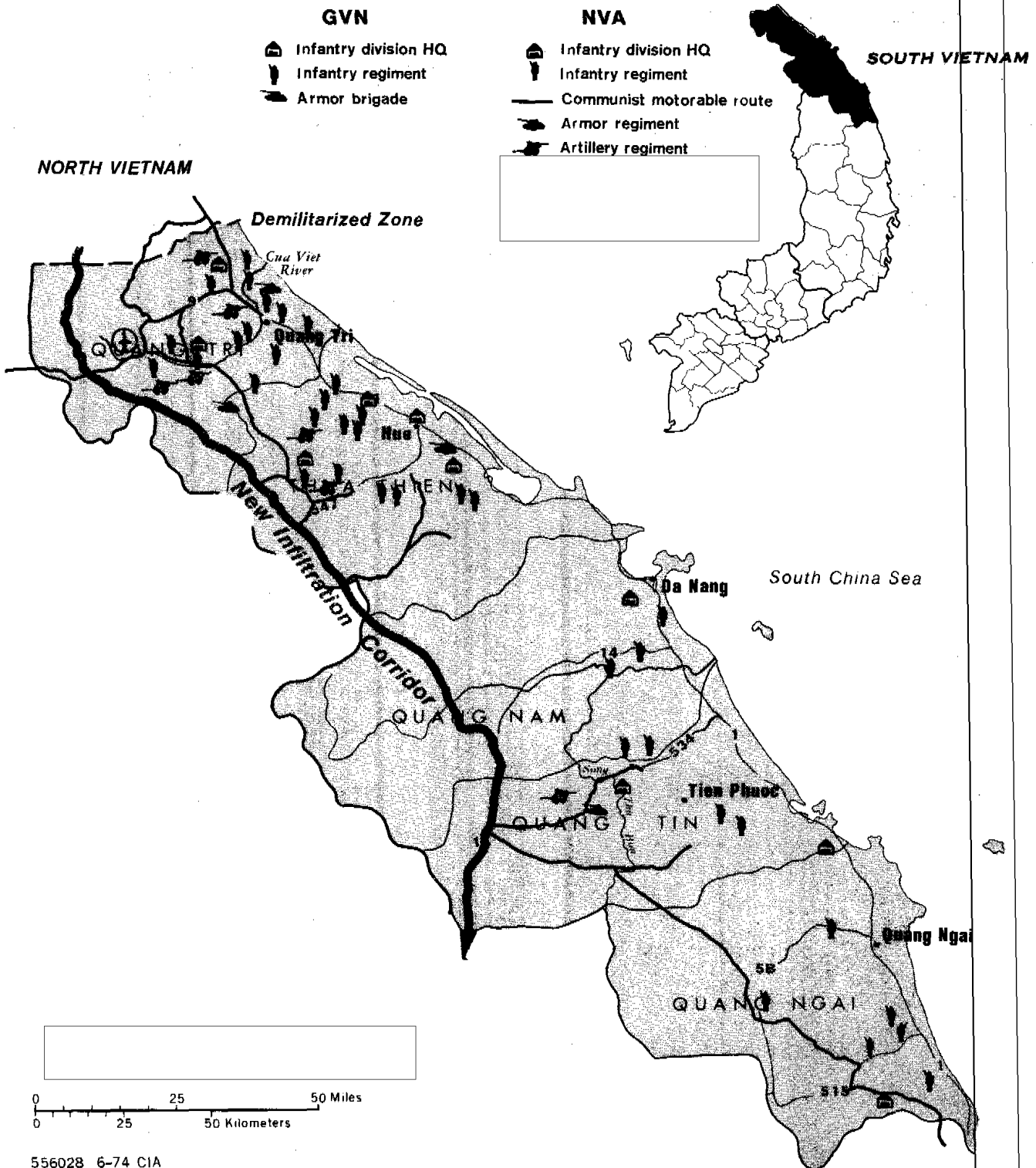
Since early May, the level and scope of the fighting have increased sharply, especially in southern Military Region 1 and in the provinces west and north of Saigon. Communist attacks appear to be directed at securing traditional infiltration corridors, expanding population and territorial holdings, and testing the government's resolve. Although the fighting may be heavy at times, most reporting indicates it will be confined to local areas and not expanded into a major country-wide offensive. As heavy summer rains reduce the mobility of opposing forces in the southern three fourths of the country, the fighting there may diminish.

This memorandum presents detailed assessments of the tactical situation in each of South Vietnam's four military regions.



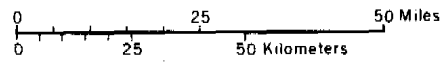
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Military Region 1



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MILITARY REGION 1

Despite its relatively small population and insignificant economic resources, Military Region 1 has been and still is of considerable military importance to both the Communists and the South Vietnamese government.

The Communists have long used the road and trail network in the western portion of the region as a corridor for infiltrating troops and supplies into South Vietnam. Hanoi's strategy in this region generally has been to secure this network, to gain access to the sea, and, if possible, to defeat the South Vietnamese on a battlefield close to North Vietnam.

In 1968 and again in 1972, Hanoi sent large combat forces directly across the Demilitarized Zone and tried to advance toward the coast. The main target in both offensives was the former imperial capital of Hue, the cultural center for all of Vietnam, and, Saigon aside, the most important city in South Vietnam. Possession of Hue is critical to the government. Its fall would be a major military and psychological blow, and might seriously threaten the survival of the Saigon government.

Saigon has always viewed the northernmost region as its first line of defense against the Communists, and its strategy has, until now, been based on blocking Communist infiltration through the region.

Little Heavy Fighting

The government controls the more populated and economically important coastal lowlands throughout much of the region; the Communists occupy most of the sparsely settled, mountainous terrain to the west. The Communists have secured their infiltration routes through the region, and they also gained access to the sea in the far northern part of the area.

Immediately before the cease-fire in 1973, the government, aware of the potential of the Cua Viet River as a supply route, tried unsuccessfully to close it to the Communists. A government armored column succeeded in capturing an old naval base near the mouth of the river, but could not hold it. The government did, however, prevent the Communists from gaining a seaport in the southern part of the region.

Since early May, the Communists have increased the fighting in this sector. Government setbacks in Quang Tin Province have already forced the South Vietnamese to shift some units, and they may even have to suspend pacification efforts in nearby Quang Ngai Province.



On balance, both sides generally have avoided significant combat, concentrating instead on consolidating their political and military positions. This is particularly true of the Communists, who are attempting to develop the northern part of Quang Tri Province into a showcase for the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

To accomplish this, North Vietnamese engineers have built several new communities, and tens of thousands of North Vietnamese civilians have been sent into Quang Tri since the cease-fire. Hanoi has introduced the same administrative apparatus it uses in the provinces of North Vietnam and has been using Dong Ha as a reception center for foreign dignitaries visiting Communist territory in South Vietnam.

The Military Balance

The South Vietnamese have 101,000 combat troops in the region, the Communists 83,000. Both sides have their forces concentrated in the northern two provinces of the region; the government has about 60,000 troops there, including its three best fighting units—the Marine, Airborne, and 1st Infantry divisions.* They face some 60,000 North Vietnamese troops, including the tough, combat-experienced 304th, 324B, and 325th divisions.

Hanoi has reduced its offensive capability in the northern provinces, however, by withdrawing three other divisions during the past year or so.



Hanoi did rebuild most of its infantry units in MR 1, move in large numbers of tanks and field artillery after the cease-fire, and shift numerous air-defense units into South Vietnam's two northern provinces from Laos and North Vietnam. Although a few air-defense units have gone home in recent months, Communist air defenses still largely offset the government's tactical air power. The North Vietnamese also appear to have an advantage in long-range artillery in this sector.

The Communists have expanded and improved their logistic position throughout the region and now have sufficient supplies on hand to support heavy fighting for at least 18 months. They have opened a major north-south infiltration route, extended their petroleum pipeline, built extensive base areas and supply facilities, and shipped in large quantities of war materiel.

**One brigade of the Airborne Division was transferred to Saigon in early June.*



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The North Vietnamese have also developed Dong Ha as a port. While the Communists still rely heavily on the overland infiltration system, Dong Ha has been used to move large quantities of supplies by sea into northern South Vietnam.

A Defensive Strategy

At the present time, neither side has a decisive edge in the region.

Despite a strong and improving position, the North Vietnamese still appear to lack the manpower to sustain prolonged heavy fighting and the Communists would require additional heavy infiltration to replace casualties. So far this dry season, Hanoi has sent in only 17,000 replacements—one of the lowest totals in the past six years.

The South Vietnamese have sufficient supplies to support their forces in MR 1 at the current level of fighting, but would be hard pressed to do so if the action increased sharply. South Vietnamese units guarding Hue would run short of ammunition in a few weeks if they expended it at the same rate as in 1972. Moreover, the government would have difficulty getting additional supplies to Hue if the Communists cut Route 1 south of the city.

These factors have led the government commander, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong—considered by many as the best field commander in the South Vietnamese army—to adopt essentially a defensive strategy aimed at buying time and inflicting maximum casualties on the Communists if they strike south again.

Truong has used the prolonged lull in combat to improve and strengthen government defenses throughout the region, and he has developed a comprehensive plan for defending Hue. The plan calls for South Vietnamese units to pull back in stages while they are still strong.

Truong believes that by this tactic he can conserve his own forces while inflicting maximum casualties on the Communists. He also realizes that he can better defend Hue with his forces in a tight cordon around the city, rather than spread out to the north and west.

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Because of the advantage the Communists gain by being close to North Vietnam, this region is likely to be the scene of heavy fighting the next time Hanoi decides to commit its forces to a major offensive. Until then, the level of military activity in MR 1 will probably remain relatively low.



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MILITARY REGION 2

Over the past few months, the North Vietnamese have augmented their combat forces in the central highlands of South Vietnam's Military Region 2. Communist combat units have shifted closer to Kontum and Pleiku cities during May, and skirmishing around these provincial capitals is probably a Communist effort to keep the government on the defensive and away from important base areas and infiltration routes. The relatively slow pace of infiltration to the highlands this dry season, however, suggests that the North Vietnamese are not planning a large-scale offensive in this region in the next few months.

At various times since the cease-fire, both sides have held the initiative in the highlands. Aware that the North Vietnamese were understrength, General Toan, the MR 2 commander, has conducted operations along the fringes of Communist-held territory in an attempt to draw the enemy into the open where he could use his air and artillery firepower. Toan's strategy has generally failed. North Vietnamese strategy, on the other hand, seems to have centered on protecting their infiltration routes and eliminating isolated government outposts. They have made only a few attempts to occupy some contested or government-controlled territory.

The first of these confrontations took place last June when government troops moved to reoccupy the village of Trung Nghia in Kontum Province, which had been seized by the Communists shortly after the cease-fire of January 1973. After three months of heavy fighting, the South Vietnamese retook the village.

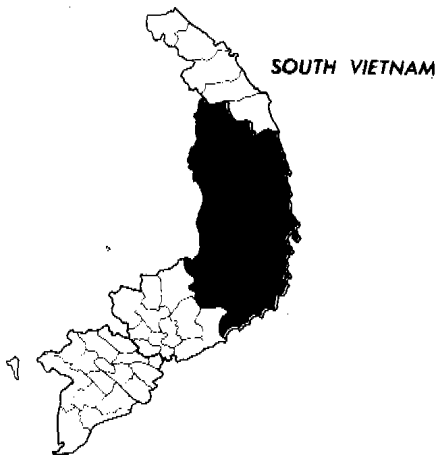
In late September, North Vietnamese tanks and infantry, supported by artillery, forced the government to abandon an outpost at Plei Djereng in nearby Pleiku Province. The base remains in Communist hands, despite government attempts to recapture it.

Last fall, heavy fighting broke out in Quang Duc Province. The Communists used a mixed force of armor, artillery, infantry, and sappers to drive South Vietnamese units from several outposts along the Cambodian border. The bases were close to the new infiltration route that the North Vietnamese were then setting up through that sector, and the Communist objective was to secure the route from government harassing attacks. Thus far, the South Vietnamese have managed to recapture only one of the positions, the Dak Song outpost. Two others remain in Communist hands, [REDACTED]

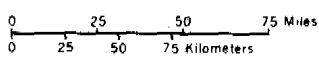
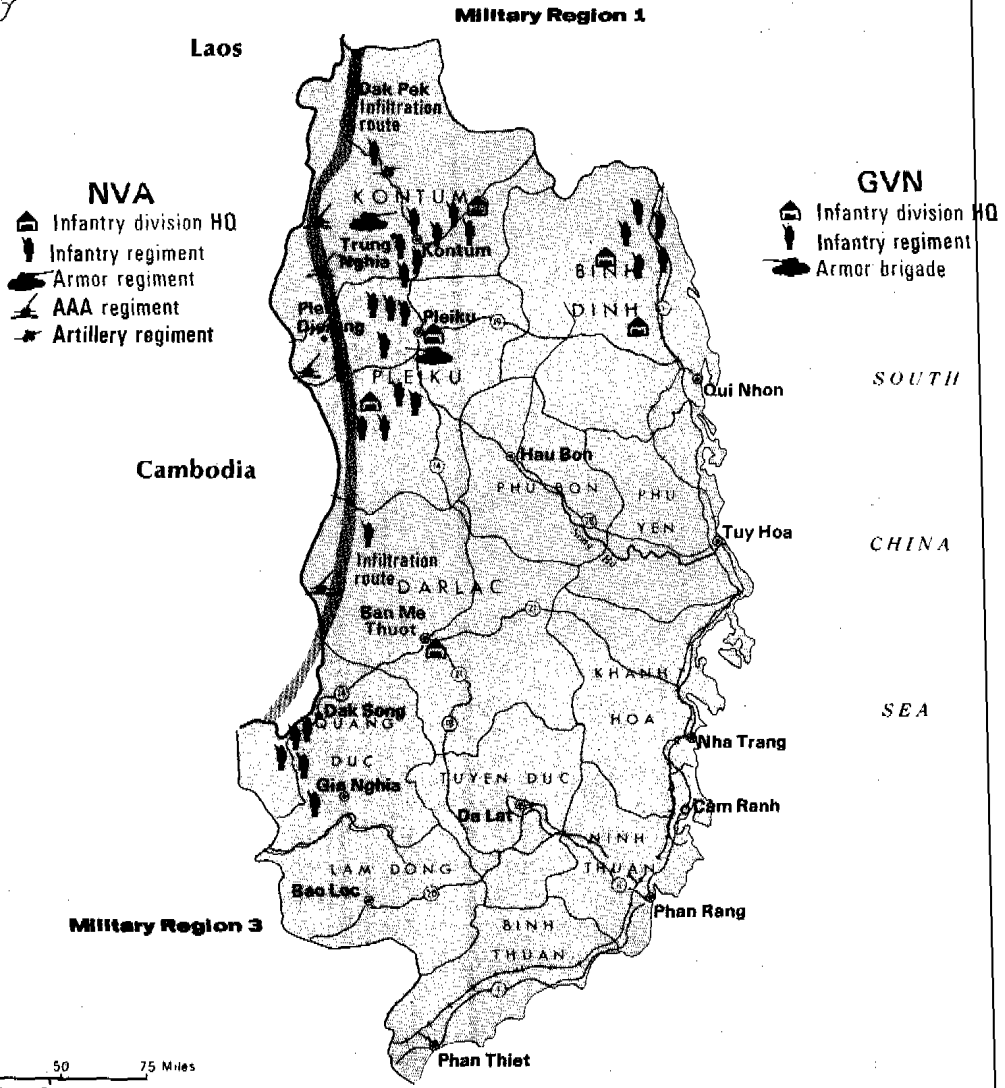
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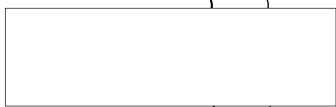


Military Region 2



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DAO PHU QUI



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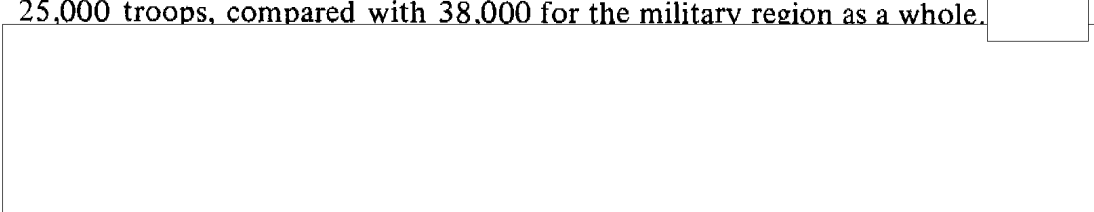


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In more recent fighting in Kontum Province, limited government attempts to cut Communist roads have resulted in severe North Vietnamese reactions. On May 16, North Vietnamese forces overran a government outpost at Dak Pek, deep in Communist territory. In retaliation, South Vietnamese aircraft bombed Communist base areas, while government troops mounted an operation against a large Communist logistic base just north of Kontum City. This drive has made little progress. The Communists appear intent on keeping the South Vietnamese relatively dispersed.

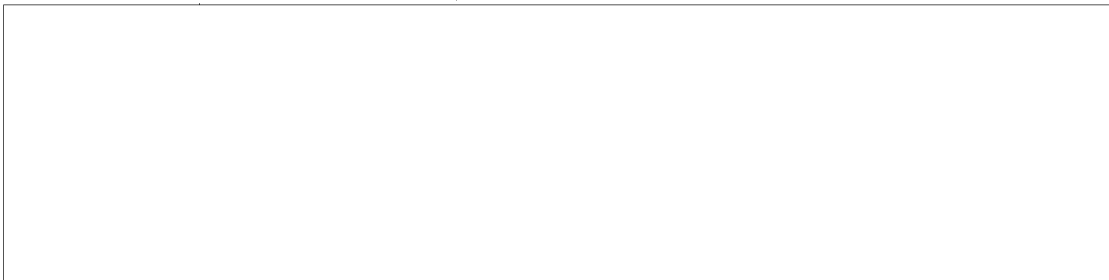
Communist Build-up

Since the cease-fire in January 1973, the North Vietnamese have steadily enlarged their combat forces in the highlands, where they now have 25,000 troops, compared with 38,000 for the military region as a whole.



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Hanoi has infiltrated approximately 10,000 replacements into the central highlands this dry season. Another 5,000 troops went to the coastal areas of the region. These new troops are enabling the Communists to rebuild understrength units and to begin a manpower pool. The infiltration total, however, is considerably lower than in past years—an indication that the North Vietnamese are not preparing for a large-scale offensive any time soon.



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The build-up in air defenses has already caused the South Vietnamese air force to change its interdiction tactics. Some government aircraft attacking Communist targets in heavily defended areas of Kontum and Pleiku provinces are now dropping their bombs from as high as 20,000 feet, significantly reducing their effectiveness.

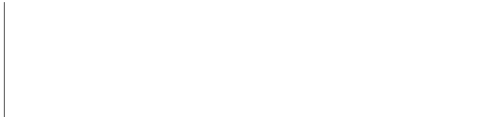
Government Forces

The South Vietnamese have approximately 78,000 men under arms in MR 2, including two infantry divisions, seven Ranger groups, and one



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armored brigade. The South Vietnamese air force provides tactical support to these forces. The bulk of the government's combat forces (45,000 men) is in the western half of the region.

Although the South Vietnamese hold a significant advantage over the Communists in terms of troop strength, many of the government units have very poor combat records. A number of MR 2 units also have high desertion rates.

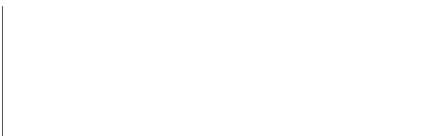
The South Vietnamese now find themselves manning defensive positions in Kontum, Pleiku, Darlac, and Quang Duc provinces. Many government positions, including those around the provincial capitals of Kontum and Pleiku, are difficult to resupply and reinforce. The roads pass through rough terrain and are easily interdicted.

Although the Communists are obviously better off than they were a year ago, they still lack a clear military superiority. In fact, neither the government nor the Communists seem to have much of an edge. Even now, Saigon has nearly twice as many combat troops in the highlands as the Communists, although this advantage is partly offset by North Vietnamese firepower.

As long as this balance remains relatively intact, neither side is likely to make any large-scale combat commitment of its forces. The government, however, may be more cautious in its operations into Communist-held territory now that the North Vietnamese units are operating at close to normal strength. For their part, the Communists still seem primarily interested in defending their territory, rather than in launching a major offensive. They may well be content to feign attacks toward the provincial capitals of Kontum and Pleiku in an attempt to tie down the South Vietnamese and keep them on the defensive.



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MILITARY REGION 3

Though each of the four military regions in South Vietnam has military significance, Military Region 3, which takes in the provinces surrounding Saigon to the west, north, and east, is in many ways the most important. If the Communists are ever to defeat the South Vietnamese government, they must secure a large base in the region and then move on Saigon, the political heart of the country.

For many years, the Communists have sought to establish and expand such a base in the provinces to the north and west of the capital, where they could take advantage of favorable jungle terrain, shorter supply lines, and sanctuary in Cambodia.

At times, their control in this area has been extensive, especially in the provinces of Binh Long, Phuoc Long, and northern Binh Duong. They were still strong there at the time of the cease-fire in January 1973, although their influence over the populated areas elsewhere in the region had badly eroded.

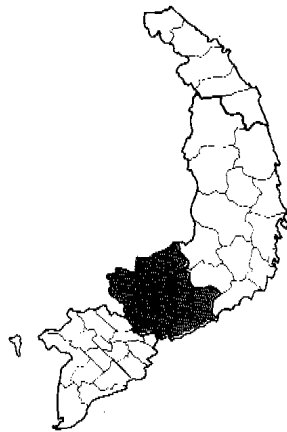
Since that time, Communist strategy in this region has been essentially to protect and expand their position along the Saigon River corridor, mainly with North Vietnamese units. Elsewhere in the region, they have used a mix of main force and Viet Cong units to try to weaken the government's hold through small-scale harassing attacks, sabotage, and terrorism. So far the government seems to have held its own rather well, defeating each important thrust by North Vietnamese units in and around the corridor and giving up little or none of its control of the population elsewhere in the region.

New Government Vigor

One of the most important moves by the government was the assignment of Lieutenant General Phan Quoc Thuan as commander of Military Region 3 late last year. Thuan considered that the South Vietnamese army was not providing adequately for the defenses of the capital city—especially in view of the new, heavier weapons available to Communist forces in the region.

Thuan immediately moved to strengthen these defenses, constructing checkpoints, bunkers, and other works designed to hinder the forward movement of Communist tanks and heavy artillery. General Thuan also shook up the administration in the region, forcing a number of key changes in province chiefs, division and regimental commanders, and his own staff.





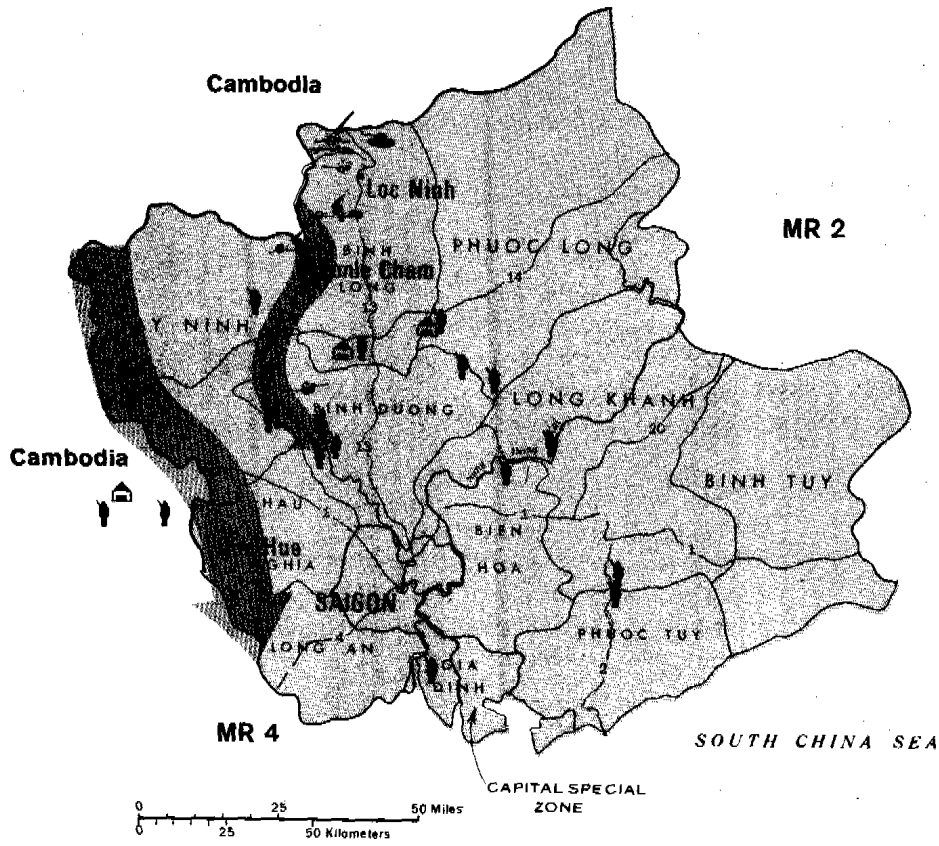
Military Region 3

GVN

- Infantry division HQ
- Infantry regiment
- Armor brigade

NVA

- Infantry division HQ
- Infantry regiment
- Armor regiment
- Artillery regiment
- AAA division
- AAA regiment



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Once these steps were taken, Thuan turned his attention to the Communist main force units. With few exceptions, all subsequent significant engagements in the region have been Communist reactions to Thuan's operations. In February, a South Vietnamese foray into two long-held Communist redoubts north of Saigon caught the Communists by surprise and disrupted their build-up along the Saigon River infiltration corridor.

Last month, overriding the timid counsel of the local commander, Thuan decided to take on two North Vietnamese regiments along Route 2 at the border of Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy provinces. The action reportedly resulted in severe North Vietnamese losses and disrupted the Communists' link between two of their important base areas.

Thuan followed up by pushing the North Vietnamese 5th Division out of Duc Hue District in Hau Nghia Province, an area that lies next to government communication routes with Tay Ninh Province to the northwest. This successful operation relieved the month-long siege of the Duc Hue Ranger base.

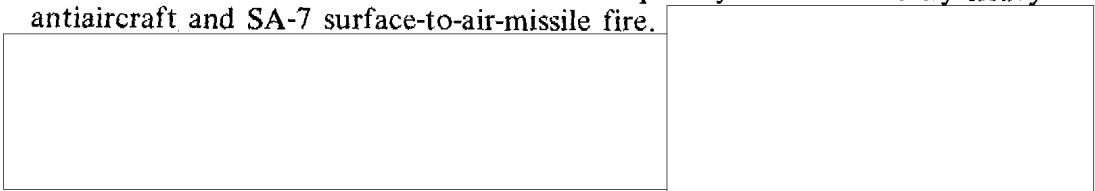
These aggressive operations have by and large kept the Communists on the defensive. Blocked in their effort to strengthen their salient in the direction of Saigon, the Communists have turned to improving their position in Phuoc Long. Part of their logistic spine from the highlands to Military Region 3 runs through the northwestern section of this province.

The Balance of Forces

Currently there are about 40,000 Communist regulars in the region—some 14,000 more than at the time of the cease-fire. Major units committed to Military Region 3 include three infantry divisions, an artillery division, an antiaircraft division, and ten infantry, sapper, and armor regiments.

The infiltration of armor, antiaircraft, and field artillery into the provinces north of Saigon in violation of the cease-fire provides the Communists with more firepower than ever before. In northern MR 3, the Communists have an air defense division and two antiaircraft artillery regiments. South Vietnamese aircraft over this area frequently encounter fairly heavy antiaircraft and SA-7 surface-to-air-missile fire.

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Opposing the Communists in MR 3 are about 96,000 South Vietnamese troops—three infantry divisions, one airborne brigade, one armored brigade,



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four Ranger groups, and supporting artillery and territorial force units. The South Vietnamese have created a reserve by moving an airborne brigade to Saigon from northern South Vietnam.

The government combat forces were increased by about 21,000 men in the past year and are now roughly two and a half times those of the Communists. The government's superiority in numbers is partly offset by the fact that its forces are spread throughout the region.

What's Ahead

The South Vietnamese are continuing to put pressure on some of the major North Vietnamese units in MR 3. Current government operations have encountered stiff Communist resistance in their efforts to recover all of the lost positions in Binh Duong Province, but the South Vietnamese have inflicted heavy losses on the Communists. Recent small scale attacks in nearby Tay Ninh Province may be followed by similar attacks elsewhere, as the Communists attempt to break up the large concentration of Saigon's forces just north of the capital.

The Communist Central Office for South Vietnam hopes to make a better showing in the region during the coming months. It issued orders for an "offensive phase during May and June to bring about a more favorable balance" against the government.

It has been characterized by the Communists as a limited series of operations not designed to renew the war on a large scale. Heavier rains during the next few months will inhibit any ambitious operations by either side that involve armor and heavy artillery.

On balance, it is unlikely that any significant change in the balance of military control by either side will result from the Communist initiative. The performance of Saigon's forces so far suggests the government can keep the military advantage in the region through the summer months.



MILITARY REGION 4

The 16 southernmost provinces of South Vietnam that make up Military Region 4 include the heavily populated, agriculturally rich flood plains of the Mekong Delta. The delta contains 7 million people—more than a third of the nation's population—and produces 75 percent of its rice and a good deal of its livestock, vegetables, and fruit.

Because of the political and economic importance of the delta, both sides have fought hard to control it, and it has experienced relatively little lessening of action since the cease-fire in January 1973.

In 1973, for example, 8,000 government troops were killed in the area and 38,000 were wounded. Communist losses were correspondingly high. The same pattern of high casualties has continued during the first four months of 1974.

The Communists rarely have been able to utilize large main force units in the delta's open and watery terrain. For this reason, the fighting in Military Region 4 is characterized by a high level of terrorism, relatively small-scale attacks, and ambushes.

A Shift in Initiative

Immediately after the cease-fire, government forces were kept busy countering a substantial Communist land-grabbing effort. They were successful, and by mid-year, the initiative began to shift slowly in the government's favor.

The Military Region 4 commander, Lt. General Nguyen Vinh Nghi, abandoned a strategy pegged to a chain of heavily defended outposts in favor of an aggressive and mobile approach that more effectively utilized the firepower of his forces—three divisions, plus supporting air, armor, and artillery. Nghi also began to use many of his regional force troops in a combat role, relying on militia to provide security for cities and towns.

As a result, there has been a significant erosion of the Communist position in some of their old delta strongholds, which have been used as supply and infiltration routes from Cambodia. General Nghi's forces have virtually eliminated the long-time sanctuary in the Seven Mountains area astride the Cambodian border, and more recently mounted large-scale operations into a major Communist base—known as Base Area 470—in western Dinh Tuong Province and southern Kien Phong Province.

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There are still a number of Communist strongholds in the delta, including the U Minh Forest, and large areas in the southernmost provinces, particularly along the coast, which the government has virtually ceased to contest.

The government's tactics have gradually forced the Communists into a more defensive posture. They had started out in the cease-fire period using combat forces to protect and enlarge their control of certain populated areas. Since autumn 1973, the focus has shifted to the protection of threatened base areas as well as supply and infiltration corridors.

Communist main force operations are now centered in large part in Dinh Tuong Province. Here, the aim is not so much to hold territory as to inflict casualties, create a climate of insecurity, and keep infiltration routes open.

The Balance of Forces

The government has some 97,000 men in the region. They are organized into three infantry divisions and one armored brigade, with supporting artillery and a large number of regional force battalions. This total gives Saigon better than a four-to-one advantage over the Communists -nearly double that of any other military region in the country. These forces are supported effectively with close air support in most areas, and by naval units and marine police who maintain security along the hundreds of miles of rivers, streams, canals, and coast line.

Government military officials are concerned, however, about the morale and combat capability of their regional forces, particularly in the southern provinces. In addition, the South Vietnamese 21st Division, said to be the poorest in the army, has done little to improve the military situation in the southern delta.

Major Communist main force combat units in the delta number some 22,000 men in 12 infantry and two artillery regiments and numerous local units. Communist units in the region are understrength and more than 10,000 would be needed to rebuild these forces to early 1972 levels.

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The commitment of regular North Vietnamese units in the delta has historically been small, compared with other areas of the country, and is likely to remain so.

There has been little significant improvement in Communist firepower since 1972. As elsewhere, they are trying to improve their anti-aircraft capability, but the development of an effective air defense system will be relatively difficult in the open terrain of the delta.

What's Ahead

Although the balance in the region weighs heavily in favor of the government, numerical superiority does not necessarily give a decisive edge in combat. By its nature, the war in the delta concedes a certain advantage to Communist guerrilla tactics and will continue to tie down a relatively large number of government troops. Unless North Vietnamese infiltration of men and supplies into the delta is substantially increased, however, the government should continue to improve its position as the Communists concentrate on protecting their base areas and supply lines.



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