

# Cong Clings to Saigon Area

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The well-coordinated Viet Cong attack near the provincial capital here last week indicates that the American plan to pacify the provinces around Saigon has bogged down.

Attacking only 20 miles northwest of Saigon the four-pronged offensive of Viet Cong battaion 506—500 to 700 men—crippled two government companies occupying the periphery of the Hop Tac (Cooperation) Plan area in Hau Nghia province. Viet Cong casualties also were high. This town (pop. 5,000) is the capital of the province.

The Hop Tac Plan for the pacification of the seven Provinces around Saigon began a year ago. It calls in the first step for the destruction of the hard-core Viet Cong units in the Provinces. But the Viet Cong attack

showed this yet to be accomplished.

The second step calls for the training of local militia to guard the villages while the regular Army conducts large-scale offensives. But, in Provinces such as Hau Nghia, there are few young men in the villages whom the government can recruit.

"We have basic problems that are impossible for us to solve," one official explained. "The population is hostile to the vietnamese government, since for decades this area has been under viet cong control.

"The viet cong have a minimum of 2,500 armed fighters in this province and can jump to 4,000 men. But the vietnamese government strength is only about 2,000 men.

"We should have a 10-to-1 force ratio of troops in our favor to defaet the viet cong—but instead we sometimes have a 2-to-1 force ratio against us."

Reliable sources indicate that in the future american combat troops may be used against these hard-core units.

Last week, the Viet Cong 506th battalion attacked, one elite government Ranger battalion engaged it in a tough day-night operation, but returned to the town of duc lap, 20 miles from Saigin, their command post, to set up their night-time defense.

"The Viet Cong knew the Rangers had been on the operation and would sleep well that night," an official explained. "One element of the Viet Cong 506th battalion crashed into the command area post housing the headquarters company.

"The Viet Cong had overpowering force; and rushed directly toward and virtually encircled the command post."

Two miles further west, other elements of the Viet Cong 506th attacked a Viet-

namese regular army company, and mortared the district town of Duc Hoa and another outpost.

"Simply in terms of government casualties, this was a disaster," one Vietnamese official explained, "but we also hurt the Viet Cong badly.

"We have found 31 Viet Cong bodies so far, and have received intelligence reports that the Viet Cong were burying 50 other bodies in a distant village. And, we think, we killed the Viet Cong batalion executive officer. We estimate a total of 200 Viet Cong killed or wounded because the U. S. Air Force jets started pounding the Viet Cong as they withdrew.

"Militarily, this engagement was probably a stand-off, but politically, it was a defeat. Everytime the Viet Cong hit one o four elite units, it takes a long time before the population regains confidence in the government."