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# Big Hanoi Offensive Expected

## Push Foreseen Before Nixon Visits Peking

By Peter A. Jay

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Jan. 3 — The buildup of Communist supplies in South Vietnam's Central Highlands has reached "historic" proportions and may indicate a major offensive early this year, senior U.S. military sources said today.

According to intelligence reports, the sources said, North Vietnam is gearing up for large-scale military action in the first months of 1972 in an effort to make a political impact in the United States—perhaps before President Nixon leaves for Peking in February.

"The enemy has never stockpiled as much stuff up there (in the Highlands) as he has now," one general officer said in an interview. "He's in a frame of mind to make a push, and that's what we're going to see."

The sources said the military supplies brought down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam over the past few months were already in place before last week's U.S. bombing raids on supply depots above the Demilitarized Zone.

They gave no location for the supplies, but they are presumably in the mountainous area around Pleiku and Kontum, where the borders of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia meet.

Two South Vietnamese fire support bases near Kontum were the targets last spring of furious assaults by the North Vietnamese, who were repulsed in several weeks of bloody fighting.

South Vietnamese troops in the Highlands were placed on alert last week, following reports that two North Vietnamese divisions were moving into position to the west of Pleiku, across the border in Laos and Cambodia.

Two brigades of South Vietnam's airborne division, which has been assigned to operations in Cambodia, were to be reassigned soon to the Pleiku area, it was disclosed here.

The thinly populated Central Highlands have long been considered one of South Vietnam's most vulnerable areas, and some officials among them John Paul Vann, the senior American in the area—have been known to suggest that the South Vietnamese in effect abandon them by concentrating their forces in the thickly settled lowlands along the coast to the east.

Control of the Highlands has been a Communist goal since the war against the French.

In the past, North Vietnamese strategists have sought unsuccessfully to cut South Vietnam in half, driving east through the Highlands down to Binh Dinh and Phuyen provinces, historically areas strongly favorable to Communist forces fighting the French and now favorable to the Vietcong.

Whether this can be accomplished under the existing umbrella of American air power is open to question, but there is no doubt that American commanders are concerned at the possibility of a Highlands offensive.

If such a drive is launched, it will be up to the South Vietnamese to stop it on the ground by themselves, for there are no American troops remaining in the Second Military Region—encompassing the Highlands.

American military sources said today there was also a good chance of an attack on South Vietnamese forces just south of the Demilitarized Zone in the next month or so, but that the highlands offensive seemed even more likely.

Last week's bombing raids, the sources said, destroyed supplies that were "fairly far back in the pipeline"—in other words, destined for use several months from now, in South Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos.

In discussing the continuing fighting on the Plain of Jars and the surrounding area in Laos, the sources said this year's Communist drive there "has a different complexion from anything they're ever done in the past."

Some nine Communist regiments have been committed to the battle, the sources said, and they are well supplied with Russian-made T-34 tanks and big 130-mm. siege guns—weapons they have not employed before in quantity.

The American sources pooh-poohed President Thieu's oft-repeated contention that 1973, not this year, will be the year of South Vietnam's major military test against the North Vietnamese.

"No it's this year that they'll make the big push," one officer said. "There's no question about it in my mind."

"They want the war back on the front pages, if not before Nixon goes to China then right in the middle of our presidential election campaign, and they think this is the way to do it."

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