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Viets Launch Le Minh Drive, No Contact Yet

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SAIGON (AP)—Several thousand South Vietnamese troops have launched an operation to retake the government Le Minh Ranger base in the central highlands which fell to North Vietnamese forces Sept. 22, military sources in Saigon reported Friday.

The operation got underway Wednesday but no major contact has yet been made with Communist-led troops, the sources said.

Backed by air and artillery support, the operation was described as of "multi-regimental" size. A South Vietnamese regiment is made up of approximately 2,000 troops.

The Le Minh base, lying on a plateau 23 miles west of the provincial capital of Pleiku, fell to elements of North Vietnam's 320th Div. backed by tanks and heavy artillery, according to the Saigon command.

Most of its garrison of 293 South Vietnamese border Rangers, half of them Montagnard tribesmen, and a dozen of their families, still are listed as missing.

Although news of the operation to retake Le Minh came from highly placed South Vietnamese military sources, there was as yet, no official confirmation of the report.

Meanwhile, government infantry and militia troops fought off a Communist-led assault about 40 miles northwest of Saigon near the district town of Tay Ninh and killed 14 attackers, the

Saigon command announced Friday.

There were no government casualties in the four-hour battle just a few miles from the spot where a government battalion suffered 46 killed, 124 wounded and 81 missing last weekend.

The command claimed Communist-led units committed 85 more ceasefire violations in a 24-hour period which ended at 6 a.m. Other action was recorded in the central highlands province of Kontum about 12 miles southwest of the provincial capital.

Ten Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were killed and four weapons seized in a fight which claimed one government soldier's life and wounded six.

In neighboring Pleiku Province, Ranger and armored cavalry units fought off an attack on a fixed position 14 miles southwest of the provincial capital of Pleiku City. The command said it lost one government soldier. Seven others were wounded in the battle in which five Communists were killed.