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Rubble is all that remains of the market place in Xuanloc after bitter fighting on Saigon's defense perimeter.

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Xuanloc Commander: 'I Vow to Hold'

By Peter Arnett .
 Associated Press

XUANLOC, South Vietnam, April 13 — "You see, we can beat them," said Col. Le Xuan Hieu, commander of the 40th Infantry Regiment inside Xuanloc. He led a score of newsmen Sunday on a tour of the smoldering ruins of what once was a thriving business district.

"There's a body over there," the colonel said proudly, pointing to a leg sticking out from under a sheet of tin roofing.

Two soldiers went by wheeling a cart full of captured weapons. A South Vietnamese medic carefully spoon-fed

milk to a heavily bandaged North Vietnamese prisoner.

Shells from Soviet-made heavy guns, thudded routinely into the city, but the colonel pushed on. The Catholic church spire was punctured like Swiss cheese, the buildings around it flattened. Soldiers fought to get aboard the few helicopters leaving town, pushing the wounded aside.

But the big news at Xuanloc, a dusty provincial headquarters in the rubber plantations 40 miles east of Saigon, was that the South Vietnamese army was holding against a concerted push by Communist-led forces.

For the first time in five weeks of

route that followed the withdrawal from the Central Highlands, the South Vietnamese army has stood and fought against a major Communist-led military push.

According to senior South Vietnamese officers at Xuanloc, the North Vietnamese have launched six major attacks against the city in the past five days, each backed up with heavy shell-fire.

Last Thursday, they penetrated to the market place and bus station, and stayed two days. The most recent attack was Sunday morning when two tanks led a battalion-sized attack.

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Associated Press

U.S. Marines seek cover during a shelling attack on Phnom Penh during the evacuation of Americans Saturday.

Xuanloc Colonel Vows to Hold

VIETNAM, From A1

Xuanloc is important because it is virtually the last stronghold on the northeast approaches to the Saigon-Bienhoa region, where 5 million people nervously await a widely predicted military assault.

As far as the commander of the 18th Infantry Division defending Xuanloc, Brig. Gen. Le Minh Dao, is concerned, Saigon won't be attacked because his men will hold out.

"I vow to hold Xuanloc," he told newsmen. "I don't care how many divisions the other side sends against me, I will knock them down."

The North Vietnamese have elements of two divisions — the 341st and the 7th — aimed at the city. The South Vietnamese have the 18th Division and an airborne brigade to defend it, a force about equal in size to that of the attackers.

But while Xuanloc has held, and the morale of the South Vietnamese officers and men here seems very high, the developing military situation has the aspects of a cat and mouse game, with the North Vietnamese the cats.

The Communist forces have cut the road to Saigon and repelled attempts

to open it. This has created a sense of imminent peril among the refugees who pulled out of Xuanloc during the fighting, and who wait at the roadside south of the city where the big Chinook helicopters land to unload ammunition and food.

There were enough helicopters Sunday for everyone, but the refugees and a group of soldiers pushed and shoved to get aboard, leaving several seriously wounded soldiers lying on the roadside after the first group of helicopters had departed.

The wounded left on the next lift. But the near-panic was reminiscent of the chaos that enveloped the evacuation of Danang and other coastal cities, and indicated how close Xuanloc is to being a powder keg.

And while the North Vietnamese so far have been repulsed in their attacks against the city, there are no indications they are letting up. As yet, they don't seem to have unleashed their major push, even though an average of 2,000 rounds of shells per day are thumping into the city, coming from the big 130-mm. and 122-mm. guns in the forests 10 to 20 miles away.

The government side has claimed large kills. One regimental commander said his men had killed 735 Communist-led troops but could show newsmen only 19 bodies. Senior commanders agree more major attacks could develop.

But whatever the future holds for the South Vietnamese defenders of Xuanloc, on Sunday they could be proud.

The city, while virtually leveled to the ground, was still in their hands. Dead enemy bodies were lying in the hot sun, and a half dozen captured North Vietnamese soldiers were on full view for the assembled press.

The South Vietnamese defenders flashed V-for-victory signs to passing reporters, and happily posed for pictures with enemy weapons in their hands.

Even the methodical crack of incoming North Vietnamese shells could not dispell the air of confidence.

Why had the troops fought at Xuanloc, and not in the north?

"How can I speak for them," said Gen. Dao, the 18th Division commander. "I can speak only for myself, and we have fought."