

# SAIGON REPORTS CLASH WITH CHINA

## Officer Says 3 Vietnamese Soldiers Die in Paracels —Boats Exchange Fire

By JAMES M. MARKHAM

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Saturday, Jan. 19—The Saigon military command reported this morning that fighting had broken out between South Vietnamese and Chinese naval and ground forces in a disputed archipelago in the South China Sea.

Lieut. Col. Le Trung Hien, the South Vietnamese spokesman, said that at 8:30 A.M. today a Vietnamese Navy commando team landed on Duncan Island in the Paracel Islands and encountered a number of Chinese troops. In an exchange of fire, three Vietnamese were reported killed and two wounded. Chinese casualties were not known.

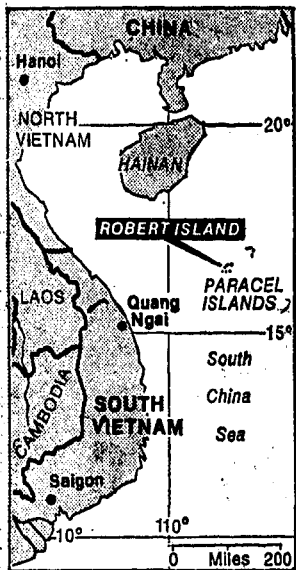
At 10:22 A.M., the spokesman said, a small Chinese patrol craft opened fire at a Vietnamese cutter, which returned the fire "in self defense." The Chinese ship was hit and caught fire while the South Vietnamese cutter suffered only light damage, Colonel Hien said.

The spokesman said that initial reports indicated that the Chinese vessel might sink.

For the last four days, Vietnamese and Chinese naval craft have been maneuvering in the water around the Paracels, which lie 200 miles east of South Vietnam's Quang Ngai Province. Colonel Hien said that yesterday afternoon the Chinese craft began to act "provocatively," maneuvering

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# Saigon Reports Clash With Chinese on Disputed Isle



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Saigon, after claiming a victory over Peking in "first round" on Robert Island, said fighting broke out with Chinese in other parts of Parcel Island group.

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as if to ram the Vietnamese ship in the area.

On Friday, Colonel Hien claimed a tactical victory over the Chinese after a small Vietnamese landing force reportedly chased a band of 20 odd fishermen off one of the islands.

The island, called Robert by international navigators and Cam Tuyen by the Vietnamese, is a desolate, guano-littered member of the Parcel Archipelago, which is claimed by both South Vietnam and China.

The Vietnamese have an extensive claim to the Paracels, going back to 1802 and the reign of Emperor Gia Long, who first exploited the guano. The French, during their colonial rule of Indochina, also claimed the archipelago, as did subsequent South Vietnamese administrations.

The Chinese, who revived their "immemorial" claim several years ago, repeated it last week. Subsequently, according to the Government here, a group of Chinese fishermen landed on Robert and planted a Chinese flag atop a wooden box.

Thursday, according to Colonel Hien, about 30 South Vietnamese Navy commandos splashed onto the western beach of the island, which is about 500 yards in length and width, and trekked across to the south side to find the 20-odd fishermen gone. The commandos took down the flag.

According to the South Vietnamese, the Chinese sent two small gunboats to the islands at the time the fishermen landed.

Yesterday Colonel Hein, asked if the South Vietnamese might fire on the lurking Chinese craft, said somberly:

"It is a hard decision to make. The big wars in world history were often started by small incidents, so we have to weigh our decisions carefully."

Later the colonel told Vietnamese reporters that the incident on the high seas might lead to war between China and South Vietnam and thereby plunge the great powers into World War III.

According to the official news agency, Nguyen Huu Chi, South Vietnam's permanent observer at the United Nations, has protested to the chairman of the Security Council.

In Saigon, newspapers

seemed to find the dispute a welcome relief from the tired fare of war news. "RVN to Sin-reds: Keep Off Islands," was the banner headline in the English-language Saigon Post.

The principal resources of the Paracels are the guano and swallows' nests made of saliva, which are cooked with pigeon, chicken or crab to make a delicacy called bird's nest soup.

The Paracels, which are about 170 miles south of the large Chinese island of Hainan, are well north of the area where the South Vietnamese have let contracts for oil exploration. But at a time when every corner of the earth is considered potential oil country, it is apparent that neither the South Vietnamese nor the Chinese want anything to go by default.