

# 'No Longer Guerrilla War'

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North Vietnam has escalated the level of warfare in Laos by massing tanks and heavy 130-mm. artillery to wipe out government forces around the Plain of Jars and challenge other positions, U.S. officials acknowledged yesterday.

"Substantial qualitative improvements" in Communist weaponry are being revealed in the offensive now rolling across Laos, State Department spokesman Charles Bray said

yesterday. Other officials said, "This is no longer guerrilla warfare."

The North Vietnamese inflicted one of the heaviest defeats of the Laotian war on the U.S.-supported Royal Lao forces and Thai "irregulars" last weekend, officials in Vientiane and in Washington now concede.

An estimated 15,000 Communist troops captured six major artillery firebases in a thrust that began Friday night. Lao government spokesmen claimed that the North Vietnamese lost 1,500 killed and

wounded. Unofficial reports from Laos said anti-Communist casualties were expected to amount to at least 500 killed and wounded.

American attempts to try to blunt that offensive with airpower cost the loss of most of the five U.S. Air Force Phantoms shot down over the weekend in Laos and North Vietnam, U.S. officials acknowledged.

According to reports from the Laotian capital of Vientiane, the Communist offensive

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is lapping at the "secret" base of Gen. Vang Pao, about 20 miles below the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao's forces are trained and equipped by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The new pattern of warfare now emerging in Laos and in Cambodia, according to Nixon administration officials, appears designed to put maximum pressure on those two nations in advance of the U.S. President's visit to Peking on Feb. 21.

North Vietnam has served notice through its own publications, State Department officials said yesterday, that it regards Laos and Cambodia as the "weak points" in the allied position in Indochina. Instead of using the current dry season to challenge allied forces in South Vietnam, where they are strongest, these sources said, the Communist thrust aimed first at Cambodia early this month, and now at Laos.

The Communist objective, administration sources claim, is to create the greatest possible alarm in the United States about the most "tender" Indochina issues that divide President Nixon and his critics in Congress: the risk of spreading warfare in Cambodia and in Laos, the fate of U.S. prisoners and a timetable for total American troop withdrawals from the war.

Administration officials now expect recurring Communist thrusts to be made in Laos and Cambodia, and probably some in South Vietnam also, between now and the time of President Nixon's arrival in Peking. They assume that North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong informed China's leaders of these intentions during his visit to Peking last month.

At the end of November and extending into early Decem-

ber, North Vietnamese troops inflicted a major defeat on a 20,000-man Cambodian force that was attempting its own offensive in northeast Cambodia. Cambodian troops were badly chopped up and fled in retreat. The defeat was a serious blow to the prestige of Premier Lon Nol and continues to reverberate in the capital of Phnom Penh.

The current Communist offensive in Laos also hit allied troops there with far heavier weight than anyone had anticipated, although an offensive in this season was expected.

State Department spokesman Bray noted yesterday that the Communist dry season offensive came earlier than usual this year, and struck during a period of "cloud cover" that "hampered our ability to provide air support."

Other officials said the Communist attackers in Laos had the advantage last weekend of extraordinarily adverse weather for flying, and pounced on allied forces around the Plain of Jars with an unprecedented array of weapons.

The loss of the Plain is a recurring event, officials noted; it has changed hands four times in the last 2 years. The significance of the Communist offensive this year, therefore, is not so much that the area once again was recaptured as in the way that it was seized this time.

North Vietnamese forces rolled up an estimated 25 of their 130-mm. guns. They have a range of about 16 miles. They also brought in about 35 tanks, according to the same field reports.

One U.S. source said the 130-mm. weapons weigh about 10 tons each and are transported on prime movers each weighing about five tons. The guns are of Russian design, but it is unclear whether those

used in Laos are of Soviet or Chinese manufacture.

In the assault, which began about 4 a.m. Friday, Washington time, Vang Pao's troops and the so-called Thai "irregulars" or "volunteers" who often fight with them were said to have been "clobbered."

After driving the anti-Communist troops out of their positions overlooking the plain, the Communists Tuesday began probing at Vang Pao's Long Cheng base, according to Lao defense spokesman Gen. Thongphan Knocksy.

The spokesman said the North Vietnamese also launched an assault in the Bolovens Plateau region of Southern Laos. But he gave no details of that developing attack.