

Laird Warns Hanoi as Air Raids Go On

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As more than 200 U.S. warplanes hit targets in North Vietnam for the second straight day yesterday, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird warned Hanoi that such raids would be ordered whenever necessary to protect remaining U.S. forces in South Vietnam.

Asserting that the current strikes were of "limited duration" and not part of a new and expanding U.S. bombing policy, Laird also accused North Vietnam of failure to abide by the 1968 "understandings" that ended sustained U.S. bombing of the north.

U.S. officials insist that those agreements were made, although they were never officially published. The North Vietnamese have never acknowledged that such "understandings" do exist.

Protecting U.S. troops against enemy arms and supply buildups in North Vietnam and Laos was the main reason for the air strikes cited by Laird. But the Defense Secretary appeared anxious at a press conference yesterday to buttress that rationale for the raids by pointing out several times—the violations of the bombing halt understanding.

The latest raids drew strong criticism from Democratic lawmakers and other foes of continuing the war.

Laird contended that Hanoi had broken the 1968 understandings by shelling cities in the south "quite recently," including Saigon on Dec. 19; by building a road through the Demilitarized Zone; by failure to engage in "substantive negotiations as promised" at Paris; and by firing on unarmed U.S. reconnaissance planes over North Vietnam.

All of these activities have been going on for some time, some dating back to 1968, and Laird has used one or two of these justifications in the past to explain large-scale U.S. "protective reaction" strikes.

He has never invoked all of them at once, however.

Laird refused to provide newsmen with any more details on the current raids, saying that they were still in progress and that he did not want to provide any details that might endanger U.S. pilots.

He did, however, say that Hanoi "was obviously confused" about what was going

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on, and was making "erroneous" claims about the attacks.

Laird appeared to be trying to refute Radio Hanoi charges that the United States had bombed in "a number of densely populated areas," hitting a school and hospital. Laird said that the United States had hit only "military targets."

Radio Hanoi has also claimed the downing of five U.S. F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers and the capture of five pilots. As of late yesterday, however, Pentagon sources indicated that they considered those claims to be exaggerated also.

The raids, should they continue for another day or two as some military sources indicate is likely, would become the heaviest against North Vietnam since the November 1968 bombing halt.

Since the sustained bombing stopped, eight large-scale

protective reaction strikes and hundreds involving just one or two planes have been made.

The current raids are being carried out by about 200 Navy and Air Force attack planes hitting enemy supply build-ups in North Vietnam and Laos, fuel depots, truck parks, Mig bases and antiaircraft and surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries.

The primary reason for the strikes, defense officials say, is to knock out the enemy supplies before they move down the Ho Chi Minh trail, with attacks on the growing enemy air defense complex guarding the trail as a close second goal.

The United States is also said to be anxious to tempt the North Vietnamese force of Mig-21s into the sky for battle since officials say little damage can be done by just bombing airfields.

At the Florida White House yesterday, presidential press secretary Ronald L. Zeigler also said that the current U.S. raids are "totally consistent" with President Nixon's previously enunciated policies on the war.

Privately, officials in Washington also say that the President in approving these raids, was making it plain to Hanoi that the administration would run the political risks at a time when the POW and air-war disputes are heating up—in this country, to thwart any sizeable North Vietnamese military success.

At the Pentagon, Laird viewed the stepped-up Communist military activity in Laos and Cambodia as related both to the increasingly secure military situation within South Vietnam, and to the President's forthcoming trip to Peking.

Laird speculated that Hanoi, still dependent on China for about 20 per cent of its war aid and wary of a Sino-American settlement on Indochina, may be trying to rupture those talks.

Asked if such tactics will make the President's trip more difficult, Laird replied with a flat "No."

Laird also cited possibilities for the Communists to try to make trouble inside Military Region II in South Vietnam in the next few months, and perhaps at other "high points" such as before the U.S. elec-

tion.

Laird also denied that the latest U.S. raids were a further expansion of the already widely expanded "protective-reaction" concept.

Asked what the differences were between his bombing policies and those of former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Laird said the raids such as the current ones are "of limited duration."

The President's actions in approving the new raids were termed "a shocking escalation" of the war by Democratic presidential candidate Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.), a move that "makes it certain none of our prisoners would be released."

McGovern said that while Bob Hope seeks to gain the release of U.S. prisoners, "the Air Force acts as the true Nixon instrument in guaranteeing that the number of American POWs will be increased."

Rep. Lester L. Wolff (D-N.Y.) also called on the President to present a "full report" to the American people on the extent of the air war. Wolff, head of a Democratic study group on "Vietnam oversight," and Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) both said they would call for a full congressional investigation of the air war when the legislators return next month.

In other points at his year-end press conference, Laird said that while he was still hopeful about chances for a U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms agreement, "we must accelerate needed programs which cannot wait on the fulfillment of hopes, but which must respond to realities."

He said this was "no time for complacency" in dealing with the Soviet arms build-up and reiterated that next year's defense budget would be bigger and that defense spending, in general, had "bottomed out," implying there would be no more spending reductions.

Laird said he was still "far from satisfied" over problem-plagued programs such as the C-5A transport, Mk48 torpedo, F-14 fighter, some shipbuilding programs and the Army's Main Battle Tank.