

U.S. Bombers Strike North For 4th Day

By Peter A. Jay
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Dec. 29 (Wednesday)—American round-the-clock bombing of North Vietnam entered its fourth consecutive day today with no sign of a halt.

In Saigon, the American military command maintained a policy of strict silence, confirming only that the raids that began Sunday are still going on and that

approximately 350 planes have been involved in the operation.

There were still no details available on specific targets or losses of American aircraft. The command has declined to comment on claims by Hanoi Radio that at least five U.S. planes have been shot down.

Hanoi Radio claimed Monday that a sixth jet had been shot down.

[Poor flying weather over the southern panhandle of North Vietnam is one reason the latest bombing offensive has not been completed, according to military sources in Washington.]

The North Vietnamese urged residents of the Haiphong area to prepare new and better bunkers as protection against the American air attacks, according to broadcasts monitored here yesterday. The tone of the broadcasts seemed to be aimed at stiffening civilian morale for a long siege.

There has been speculation, but no confirmation, that the raids have been directed at North Vietnamese airfields—at least those in the southern part of the country.

Additionally, military sources suggest that the planes are hitting truck traffic on the North Vietnamese side of the border passes leading to

Laos and the infiltration routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Antiaircraft artillery and surface-to-air missile sites are also virtually certain to be among the targets.

Planes used in the raids include both Air Force and Navy aircraft.

The Air Force planes, primarily F-4 fighter-bombers, are mostly based in Thailand, though the three squadrons of F-4s based at Danang—the last high-performance jets left in South Vietnam—are presumably also involved.

Navy pilots are flying F-4s and A-3 and A-7 bombers from two carriers, the Constellation and the Coral Sea, stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam. The carriers can put less than 200 planes in the air, probably only about half of them at one time.

In Saigon, the bombing was the dominant subject in local political discussions—but in the holiday season that begins at Christmas and continues through the lunar new year in February political discussions were drawing decidedly few participants.

The opposition reaction appeared surprisingly limited, with antiwar elements saying

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openly they hoped the bombing would speed an end to the fighting.

National Assemblyman Tran Van Tuyen, a respected lawyer and critic of the government, said he thought the reason for the strikes was above all political.

By launching offensives recently in Cambodia and Laos, Tuyen said, the North Vietnamese sought to "undermine Mr. Nixon's prestige before he goes to Peking. It is to recover that prestige that he is bombing North Vietnam. I see no prospect for peace for the time being, but I think the U.S. is in a stronger position now to deal with the Communists."

Opposition senators Hong Son Dong and Pham Van Tam

were inclined to a conspiratorial view. They said the bombing was a "fake," having been arranged in advance with Hanoi by the U.S. and China as part of a plan to reach a political settlement in Indochina. They did not elaborate.

The most critical comments on the bombing came from Assemblyman Ho Ngoc Nhuan, who editorialized in the newspaper Tin Sang that the bombing was simply "a bold attempt to reverse U.S. failures."

Progovernment leaders and military men, not surprisingly, expressed their support for the bombing and said they hoped it would disrupt North Vietnamese infiltration. One violently anti-Communist deputy said he thought the United States should increase its air armada by tenfold.