

Saigon Is Full of Talk Of Further Escalation

By Ward Just

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Feb. 28—Saigon is filled with talk of increased escalation — or, as it is described here, “tightening the noose” of the war against North Vietnam.

The minings of rivers and estuaries, the naval shelling and artillery fire from South Vietnam across the Demilitarized Zone all have happened in the past week and are seen here as significant new moves in the effort to put pressures on the North. (There were no minings or naval shelling Monday.)

Even with these new raises in the bidding, “There are still some chips we have yet to play,” as one official here put it.

Other Possibilities

These include the bombing of North Vietnamese airfields, particularly the jet strip near Hanoi, the bombing of the docks at Haiphong, the destruction of the water control and flood control systems in, for example, the Red River Delta, and the mining of Haiphong harbor.

Surface-to-surface missiles have not been used against North Vietnam and B-52 bombers have been used only occasionally against targets above the DMZ.

The disposition here is to believe that when and if any of these measures are taken, they will be taken one at a time. As one well-informed source put it half humorously tonight: “If we went and did

all these things at once, and Hanoi still didn't give up, what would we do then? Invade?”

The rapid escalation of the war against the North in the past week, however, is not consistent with the general pattern the Administration has followed in “tightening the noose” on the North Vietnamese regime. [In Washington, President Johnson said Monday that the new steps are “more far reaching” than previous action but denied that they constitute escalation of the war.]

The bombing began in February, 1965, with a single strike in the southern panchandle. Several days passed before there was a second strike.

Then targets moved northwest, up almost to the Chinese border. First to be hit were supply dumps and troop concentrations, next bridges and railroads, finally radar station, roads, POL (petroleum, oil, lubricants) depots, and now thermal power plants.

175 Targets in One Day

From one strike against a single target in a single day, American pilots have gone as high as 175 targets in a day. Bombs have fallen closer to Hanoi and Haiphong. In the beginning, each objective was carefully selected and cleared, but now under certain circumstances pilots may strike at targets of opportunity.

All of these earlier turns of the screw, however, came gradually.

The latest have come one on top of the other and represented significant departures. The emplacing of “a limited number” of air-delivered, non-estuaries is the most important, since by their nature mines are not a discriminating weapon.

Despite the great interest in the escalated war in the North here, well-informed sources insist that the American emphasis is still on the ground war in the South.

Cleared by White House

The extent to which the American Military Command in Saigon participates in the decisions to bomb or not to bomb targets in the North has always been cloudy. Each mission is, of course, cleared by the White House and the war in the North itself has been described here as “a Washington.”

But it was learned today that U.S. Commander Gen. William C. Westmoreland has operational control of air strikes and presumably naval gunfire from the Demilitarized Zone 60 miles north to the seaport town of Donghoi.

Much of the intelligence about the area comes from sources in South Vietnam, or from American reconnaissance aircraft based in South Vietnam, and many of the targets have a direct effect on American troops in the South. One example is the North Vietnamese Division 324B, which is normally located

either in the Demilitarized Zone or just north of it.

Still officials here do not appear to regard the bombing as the critically decisive matter it sometimes seems from Washington.

The judgment here on the strikes North has not changed — Westmoreland calls them “important, essential and effective” and it appears unthinkable to anyone here that there will be de-escalation or anything approaching de-escalation.

Among other things, the Command here is convinced of the correctness of its infiltration estimates of 8000, give or take a thousand, per month, and, apparently, having ironed out differences, Washington agrees.

The expectation, in the face of what the Command insists is growing infiltration and wider war in the South, is that the war in the North will continue to inch upward.

As one military official pointed out today, if the harbor at Haiphong is ever mined it will be not a new ploy but an “extension” of the mining of the rivers and estuaries begun early this week.