

Reds Hit Convoys on Highway 9

A.P. & U.P.

Saigon

United States helicopters flew another 2000 South Vietnamese troops into Laos yesterday, despite intense ground fire that is inflicting increasingly heavy air losses.

Dispatches from Laos said six more U.S. helicopters were shot down during the day.

Communist activity increased sharply in South Vietnam just below the demilitarized zone and South Vietnamese convoys were ambushed on Highway 9 and left in flames. A U.S. convoy was ambushed there earlier and intense anti-aircraft fire was reported.

Highway 9 is the axis of the South Vietnamese drive into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail.

SECURITY

UPI correspondent Robert E. Sullivan reported from Khe Sanh that units of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division were rushed into position below the DMZ "to bolster security." Another 1500 U.S. Marines remained off the coast for use if the North Vietnamese crossed in force there.

Resistance stiffened in Laos, and American pilots reported heavy Communist bombardments of South Vietnamese convoys and of artillery positions along the border. The Communists mined Highway 9 in Laos so thoroughly artillery is being

flown in slung under big American helicopters.

The exact number of helicopters lost in Laos was not known. The U.S. command has reported the loss of ten helicopters and two planes in recent days, nine of the cop- ters in Laos, but it reports only helicopters totally destroyed. UPI front dispatches put the number shot down at 26. South Vietnam has had losses but reported only two -

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copters carrying photogra-
phers.

The U.S. command gave a clue to the rising copter toll by announcing that U.S. heli- copters flew 500 missions across the border Thursday. These included troop airlifts, gunships, medical evacuation and supply.

Dispatches said the South

Vietnamese now have about 13,000 troops inside Laos and that 2000 of them were flown in Friday as the weather im- proved.

In Vientiane, the Laotian government announced a state of emergency because of "the new situation created by the recent entry of the South Vietnamese troops into Southern Laos." Speculation

— and it was just that — was that Vientiane feared Red Chinese intervention.

The situation in Northern Laos worsened and Vientiane dispatches said a force of 22,000 North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao is closing in on Long Cheng, the headquar- ters of General Vang Pao, 90 miles north of Vientiane and about 300 miles northwest of the South Vietnamese incur- sion.

No major battles have been reported in Laos but South Vietnamese spokesmen said 33 Communists were killed yesterday in the first significant encounters since the invasion began five days ago.

SUPPLIES

No large stocks of supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail have been reported but a dis- patch from Khe Sanh said three Soviet-built PT-76 tanks and 19 trucks had been captured along with 43 tons of ammunition and some weapons and gasoline.

There was more heavy fighting in Cambodia near the South Vietnamese border where two SOUTH Vietnam- ese task forces were trying to clean out Communist sanc- tuaries. The South Vietnam- ese reported killing 77 enemy tuaries. The South Vietnam- Thursday, bringing to 618 the number reported slain in the nine-day-old operation. South Vietnamese losses were put at 76 killed and 303 wounded.

Front dispatches gave a more harrowing account of the operation in Laos than in- dicated in Saigon briefings.

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Sullivan reported a sharp clash near Lang Vei, the old Green Beret camp in South Vietnam just inside the bor- der from Laos.

He said U. S. Army Cobra gunship pilots told him last night, "We are being out- classed in Laos. The bad guys are dug in under 10 feet of cover in their bunkers and we just can't get through."

The same officers said South Vietnamese armored units 12 miles inside Laos are taking extremely heavy fire and that Highway 9 was mined. The pilots said the Communists were trying to outflank the armored column and attack it from the rear.

ARTILLERY

UPI correspondent Ken- neth Braddick reported from the front that Captain Phan Nan Hien, a South Vietnam- ese artillery commander, told him his Battery was being pulled back from the Laotian border to Khe Sanh to be flown into Laos.

Hien said Highway 9 was too dangerous to take the battery into Laos by road. He said his unit had been hit by at least 100 122mm Communist shells in the past three days and estimated that another 200 mortar shells and rockets had been fired in from Laos.

THIEU

President Nguyen Van Thieu and General Creighton W. Abrams, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, visited the area of Khe Sahn.

Thieu said he found progress in Laos "very encouraging." He repeated that the operation would be limited in time and area.

Thieu told newsmen: "We have discovered many storage depot areas which means we have selected a good target."

"We have not yet had heavy contacts" with the North Vietnamese, he added, but some South Vietnamese officers are predicting heavy fighting soon.

Asked by reporters if it might be necessary to invade North Vietnam as Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky suggested earlier this week, Thieu replied it would "not be necessary at this time."

To a question of whether the South Vietnamese could conduct the Laos operation without U.S. air power, Thieu replied: "Frankly, we still need American air support."