

# Laird Says Drive in Laos Is Still 'According to Plan'

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By The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON, March 22—Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that the South Vietnamese drive in Laos was still "going forward according to plan."

At an impromptu Capitol Hill news conference, Mr. Laird added, however, that any withdrawal carried out with the enemy in contact was "a difficult military operation."

Mr. Laird, who made his comment after testifying in closed session before the Senate Appropriations Committee, also said that "protective reaction" bombing of North Vietnamese missile sites stopped as of noon today. "I want to make that clear," he added. "Those strikes have stopped."

United States pilots will be allowed to protect themselves, he said, "but as far as large strikes are concerned, that

question will be answered on the basis of what happens from now on."

The current strikes have been successful in damaging missile sites, he said, explaining that they had been carried out because the North Vietnamese fired Soviet-built SAM missiles across the demilitarized zone for the first time since general American bombing north of the 17th Parallel was halted by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968.

As for the withdrawal from Laos, Mr. Laird said that the entire operation, which began Feb. 8, had never been expected to last more than five to eight weeks. He said that it was intended to disrupt supply routes and that it "always was anticipated that the South Vietna-

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mese would not occupy territory in Laos."

The Secretary did not directly answer a question whether the Laotian operation had actually been cut short, but he commented that the North Vietnamese had reacted in a "very vicious, violent fashion."

Earlier, a Defense Department spokesman described the operation as a successful test of the Nixon Administration's program of Vietnamization—turning the fighting role over to the South Vietnamese.

## Capability Emphasized

Although reluctant to characterize the over-all success of the campaign, the Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, said it indicated that the South Vietnamese had the capability of mounting large-scale operations in Cambodia and Laos.

The South Vietnamese, he told newsmen, also have the capability of seizing the initiative in Laos, disrupting supply lines, setting back the North Vietnamese timetable and engaging main-force enemy units.

"In general, they have acquitted themselves very well," Mr. Friedheim added, but he conceded that they would not have been able to function without heavy American air power.

"At this stage of the game it requires U.S. air support, and that was provided," he said.

It is the first time South Vietnamese troops have operated in the field in so large an operation without American advisers. For that reason the campaign has been regarded as a major test of the Vietnamization program.

Mr. Friedheim denied that the South Vietnamese were retreating from Laos in the face of heavy enemy pressure, describing the action as a planned withdrawal "being accomplished in accordance with the plan."

## May 1 Deadline Indicated

The withdrawal phase of the six-week-old operation was to have begun about this time, for officials both in Washington and Saigon had indicated that the South Vietnamese would remain until the start of the rainy season around May 1.

According to Mr. Friedheim, no time limit was ever set for the operation.

He said it would be several months before the effect of the Laotian campaign could be assessed, but the indications were that the South Vietnamese had accomplished their mission of disrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply line.

The main north-south link is still blocked, he said, adding that the estimates were that in the current dry season the North Vietnamese were able to bring down only about 20 per cent of the supplies moved last year.

Once the South Vietnamese pull out, he said, there is no doubt that the North Vietnamese will attempt to re-establish the trail network and supply complex.