

Thieu Terms Laos Drive Saigon's 'Biggest Victory'

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DONGHA, South Vietnam, March 31—President Nguyen Van Thieu declared today that his troops' recent thrust into Laos had attained "the biggest victory ever" for the armed forces of South Vietnam.

In a news conference of nearly two hours, held under a blazing sun in a cemetery at the South Vietnamese Army base here, Mr. Thieu insisted that the operation had achieved its objectives of disrupting supply lines, destroying stockpiles of war supplies and preventing any "significant" Communist offensives this year in the northern provinces of South Vietnam.

The news conference was Mr. Thieu's first in more than a year.

His Tone Is Confident

It was clearly called in an effort to offset the widespread belief that the South Vietnamese had been defeated in their 45-day major campaign, that they had been forced to retreat by heavy Communist counterattacks, that their morale was shaken and that frictions had developed between the American and South Vietnamese commands. The President denied all such assumptions.

"I have learned," he said, "through some articles, through some periodic magazines, from daily magazines, which said that the United States said that the Vietnamese did not commit enough troops, that Vietnamese say that the United States had not provided enough support and that the redeployment of the Vietnamese troops from Laos is a defeat—disorder, disaster. I believe that is not true and is completely wrong."

The whole tone and manner of the President, as he spoke in English to reporters and addressed assembled airborne troops, was one of confidence that whatever the price paid by the South Vietnamese in

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casualties, the operation was worth it.

"As a general, as a combatant, let me say I am proud of you," he told the airborne forces. "I am proud of your performance. This is the biggest victory ever. You have caused a psychological breakdown to the Communists, you have hurt their moral seriously."

"This year you will achieve more victories. Thanks to these victories, we will be able to shorten the war."

He strolled among the paratroopers and asked one whether he had "ever fought any battle as exciting as this one."

The paratrooper, standing at attention, did not answer. To another, the President asked: "Did you fight well?" The soldier replied: "yes, sir."

Stresses Saigon's Role

At his news conference, conducted as he sat on two wooden ammunition boxes in a small grove of pines about seven miles south of the demilitarized zone, Mr. Thieu emphasized that the invasion of Laos was a South Vietnamese operation, taken on Vietnamese initiative, only "supplemented" by United States airpower.

Asked whether there were differences between the American command and himself over the timing of withdrawal, Mr. Thieu said that the decision to end it was a "decision of the Vietnamese and we ended it because we judged the objectives of the operation to have been achieved."

Sources in Washington have reported that President Thieu decided to call off the operation, called Lam Son 719, rather than suffer more casualties, despite suggestions from the American command here that it continue.

Even though the bulk of South Vietnam's forces retreated from Laos, Mr. Thieu said, Lam Son 719 would be kept alive by lightning raids such as one whose start he announced today.

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United Press International

ENCOURAGED: President Nguyen Van Thieu making a point as he talked to Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of Operation Lam Son 719, at Dongha. Mr. Thieu told South Vietnamese forces he was proud of performance.

The raid, which military sources said would last about three days, involved United States helicopters and a small South Vietnamese unit. They were said to have gone 14 to 16 miles into Laos.

Mr. Thieu said he had no knowledge of reports from Washington that American air support would continue for such operations only for seven days more.

Defines U.S. Responsibility

"The United States Government and the United States Army," he said, "only have the responsibility of providing support to all military operations conducted by our own initiative. So, the operation that has taken place this morning is also decided by us. This is a new attack, a new phase."

He also called it a "new-type operation" and said that even after the rainy season began in May, "we will have to continue this new operation if the situation demands."

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Asked whether the South Vietnamese intended to invade North Vietnam, Mr. Thieu said that his army "has the capability to attack North Vietnam under some form" whether or not the United States provided air support. The extent of the American support, he said, would determine the type of operation.

"But I believe that, even without United States support, I could still choose a form of attack into North Vietnamese territory."

Mr. Thieu, who answered foreign reporters in English and local reporters in Vietnamese, said he saw no mistakes in the Laos incursion. He did mention "technical difficulties" that left some South Vietnamese troops without sufficient supplies but said that this problem, with American air support, was cleared up in three days.

As for the reports of a hasty retreat, Mr. Thieu said any

withdrawal phase was difficult in military strategy. The object, he said, is to surprise the enemy when ready to withdraw. And, he said, "I think the fact that we have achieved our withdrawal very fast is a good thing, and not a bad thing, because the Communists did not have time to react."

Sgt. Nguyen Van Du, one of the paratroopers at Dongha today, saw the battle in different terms.

"The enemy was doped," he said. "I heard they were given 'no fear' medicine that made them fanatical and insensible to our fire. They kept coming in, running in on us, over the dead bodies of their friends."

Asked if he would go back in, he replied with hesitation: "If I am ordered to."