

Abrams' Return and Drop in Peace Hopes

By Peter Lisagor

By Chicago Daily News

WASHINGTON — President Nixon has underscored the change in the U.S. combat role in Vietnam from ground to air action with his announced intention to name Gen. Creighton Abrams as Army Chief of Staff.

The long-expected promotion of Abrams, 57 to the Army's top command post had been delayed by the North Vietnamese offensive, which began on Easter and which threatened for a time to refute Abrams' assess-

ment of South Vietnam's defense forces.

Abrams, who engineered the replacement of U.S. combat troops with South Vietnamese fighting forces, will succeed the man he succeeded in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland.

The change in the U.S. command in Vietnam comes at a time when the diplomatic grapevine has been rife with confident expectations that North Vietnam might yield to reported Russian pressures and return to the Paris peace talks in a more compliant mood.

These expectations have been altered considerably, however, according to diplomatic sources.

Hanoi authorities apparently rejected the advice of Soviet President Nikoiai Podgorny, who conferred with them in recent days. Stopping in Calcutta, India, on his way home, Podgorny radiated confidence that the Paris talks would resume soon on a more positive note.

But news dispatches from Moscow indicated that Podgorny encountered stormy weather in Hanoi, where the North Vietnamese Communists put up what sources here called "a heroic fight"

in discussions with the Soviet leader.

A Russian source here has confirmed that Podgorny had limited success in urging Hanoi to be less intransigent.

The North Vietnamese have been vitriolic in their propaganda output against the Russians for receiving President Nixon at the Moscow summit at a time when he had ordered mines laid in North Vietnamese harbors.

U.S. officials here still believe the Paris peace talks will resume in the near future. But the optimism that preceded Podgorny's visit to Hanoi, and the subsequent but unrelated trip of presidential adviser Henry Kissinger to Peking, has momentarily waned here.

The president obviously intends to adhere to his own timetable for reducing the U.S. ground presence in Vietnam, despite the current snag in diplomatic efforts. He is scheduled to make another announcement about the U.S. troop levels on or before July 1, when the ceiling will drop to 49,000 men.

Abrams must be confirmed in his new post by the senate Armed Services Committee, and some delay might occur because of the case of Gen. John Lavelle, the former commander of the 7th Air Force who was demoted and retired after he had ordered unauthorized raids into North Vietnam.

What Abrams knew about Lavelle's defiance of orders is a question some senators, including Harold Hughes of Iowa and William Proxmire of Wisconsin, have been asking. Most observers here doubt, however, that Abrams' eventual confirmation will be long delayed.

Abrams is one of the most highly regarded generals in the Army, and has been called on as a troubleshooter in three wars.

He is widely credited with having trained the South Vietnam army to a point permitting the withdrawal of nearly half a million Americans.

President Nixon has quoted him several times as saying that the South Vietnamese can "hack it" in their own defense, but it remains clear that their capability remains heavily dependent upon massive U.S. air support.