

NIXON ANNOUNCES A WITHDRAWAL OF 20,000 MORE FROM VIETNAM; ASSERTS AIR RAIDS WILL CONTINUE

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SPEECH TO NATION

NO TEXT

He Offers a Generally Optimistic View of Military Situation

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By ROBERT B. SEMPLE

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WASHINGTON, April 26— President Nixon announced tonight that he would withdraw 20,000 more American troops from Vietnam, a move that would reduce authorized American troop strength to 49,000 by July 1.

In the text of his speech prepared for delivery tonight, Mr. Nixon gave a generally optimistic assessment of the military situation in Vietnam, and quoted the American commander in Indochina—Gen. Creighton Abrams—as saying that the South Vietnamese could withstand the enemy offensive if the United States continued to provide air and sea support.

Mr. Nixon said that he would continue air and naval attacks on North Vietnam "until the North Vietnamese stopped their offensive in South Vietnam."

The President sounded yet another optimistic note when he said that the United States would resume the Paris peace sessions tomorrow "with the firm expectation that productive talks leading to rapid progress will follow through all available channels."

The Defense Department volunteered a sanguine assessment of battlefield conditions, while the State Department expressed hopes that Mr. Nixon's decision, to return to the negotiating table in Paris, announced last night at the White House, would lead to fruitful and serious talks.

Enemy's Losses Noted

The Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, said he found cause for cheer in the fact that after four weeks of hard fighting the South Vietnamese had "acquitted themselves well" under adverse conditions.

"We are encouraged," he said, adding that "the enemy has taken very major casualties and is on his way to another set of losses similar to the 1968 Tet offensive."

According to "estimates and approximations," he said, the enemy—the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong—had "suffered half or more losses than he suffered in 1968."

At the State Department, meanwhile, officials said the United States had decided to attend the peace talks tomorrow to "explore" the possibility that Hanoi might be prepared to act in a more conciliatory manner.

The State Department officials also hinted broadly that the United States was prepared to resume secret talks with the North Vietnamese in Paris, particularly if Le Duc Tho, a member of the Hanoi Politburo, returned to Paris as expected.

The State Department spokes-

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man, Charles W. Bray 3d, refused despite intensive questioning to explain why the United States had agreed to return to the negotiating table after repeatedly saying that it would not do so while the North Vietnamese invasion continued.

However, speculation persisted here that the secret visit to Moscow last weekend by Henry A. Kissinger, the President's national security adviser, had played an important role in Mr. Nixon's decision to resume the talks. Mr. Kissinger's mission was disclosed yesterday.

Privately, officials insisted that although there were encouraging signs on the military front, and elements of hope, however slim, on the diplomatic front, Mr. Nixon remained firm in his readiness to invoke additional American air and sea power to compensate for the dwindling number of combat troops and to help Saigon resist the enemy assault.

As evidence, Pentagon

sources said that the United States was preparing to send 36 more F-4 fighter-bombers to Southeast Asia. The planes are expected to leave Homestead and Eglin Air Force bases in Florida in a few days.

200 Planes for Asia

This move would bring to about 200 the number of heavy bombers and fighter-bombers flown to the war zone since the enemy offensive began late in March. In addition, the Navy has roughly doubled the number of its fighting ships off Vietnam.

The President's speech represented his first public assessment of the situation in Vietnam since the North Vietnamese crossed through the demilitarized zone into South Vietnam with thousands of troops supported by tanks and other armor.

It also represented his eighth public announcement on the numbers of United States troops in Vietnam since he assumed office on Jan. 20, 1969, when the authorized strength in Vietnam was 549,500 men.

Mr. Nixon began withdrawing troops from South Vietnam in June, 1969, with an announcement on Midway Island that 25,000 would come home by Aug. 31. During 1969 and 1970, Americans left Vietnam at an average rate of 10,000 to 12,000 men a month.

The monthly rate accelerated rapidly after Mr. Nixon's sixth withdrawal statement, on Nov. 12, 1971. Under withdrawal timetables announced then and on Jan. 13, 1972—his last statement on troops before tonight—Americans have been leaving Vietnam at a rate of about 23,000 men a month.