

LAIRD SAYS ALLIES HAVE CARRIED OUT MISSIONS IN LAOS

Secretary Insists That No
U.S. Ground Soldiers Are
Fighting There Now

DENIES SHIFT IN POLICY

He Tells Senate Panel About
Brief Incursions During
Specific, Limited Forays

MAY 19 1970

By TAD SZULC

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 18—
Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that both United States and South Vietnamese forces had made brief incursions into Laos on specific limited missions in the past, but he insisted that no Americans were engaged in ground combat on Laotian territory now.

Mr. Laird told the senators that he was not familiar with Mr. Lam's statement yesterday and said that as far as he knew the South Vietnamese Army obeyed the same guidelines as the United States forces, which would confine their forays into Laos to "hot pursuit," "protective reaction" and rescue missions.

New Formula Is Used

In Key Biscayne, Fla., where President Nixon spent the weekend, a White House spokesman said that there had been "no change in the extent of our activities in Laos."

"Our policy is unchanged," he continued. "We do not have American ground troops in Laos."

A State Department spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, said at a news briefing that "we

cannot speak for the South Vietnamese Government" after he was asked to confirm the reports that Saigon's forces were in combat in Laos.

He said "no comment" when asked whether the United States Government was seeking to ascertain the accuracy of the reports on South Vietnamese activities across the Laotian border.

Other officials suggested that the State Department preferred not to be drawn into discussions over the definition of "protective reaction."

They recalled that in ground

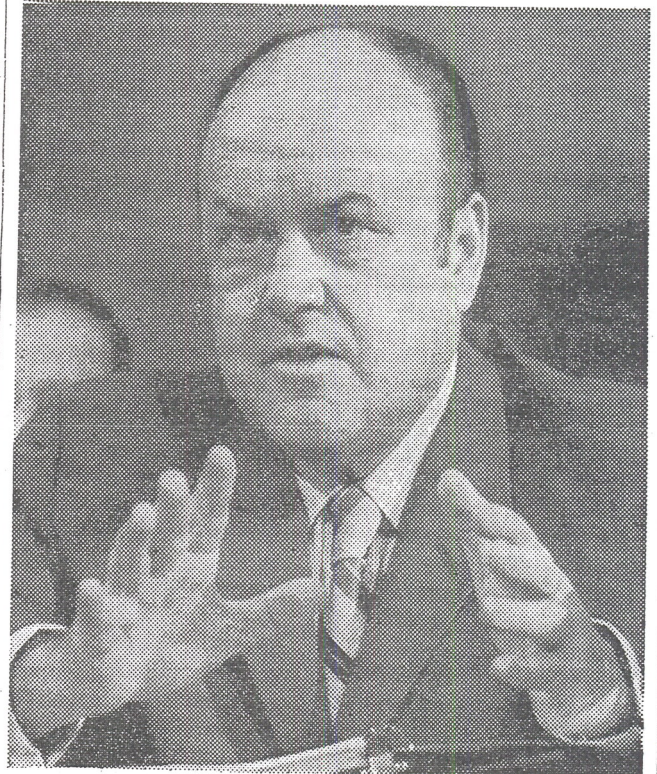
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operations in Cambodia as well as in air strikes at North Vietnam this month, the Defense Department had invoked the new formula of "reinforced protective reaction" to justify actions of considerable magnitude. Therefore, the officials said, it would not be useful to engage in explanations of subtle differences between various definitions of what Mr. Laird described today as "protective reaction."

While officials acknowledged that Col. Thongphanh Knoksy, a spokesman for the Laotian Defense Ministry, called last Friday for assistance from South Vietnamese forces. They said that no major allied thrusts in that country had been contemplated.

In his Senate testimony, Secretary Laird stressed that the "protective reaction" missions—short incursions into Laos to prevent enemy troops from attacking American or South Vietnamese forces—were permissible under an amendment to the current Defense Appropriations Act, which prohibits the use of American ground troops in Laos or Thailand.



The New York Times
Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird at the Senate hearing

He agreed with the Senators that it would not be in accordance with this amendment if American troops or South Vietnamese troops accompanied by United States advisers, were sent against enemy sanctuaries or supply bases in Laos.

A Sharp Distinction

Mr. Laird drew a sharp distinction between past brief penetrations in Laos by allied forces and the present "search and destroy" operations in Cambodia.

"Their mission is not a ground combat mission or search and destroy or anything like that," he said.

Mr. Laird recalled that he had spoken of these brief incursions into Laos as far back as a news conference in South Vietnam on March 10, 1969. He insisted that there had been no changes in the "rules of engagement" under which Americans are permitted to enter Laotian territory.

Discussing the Cambodian situation, Mr. Laird said that he would not recommend to President Nixon the cessation of all air operations against enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia after United States troops are withdrawn June 30.

He made it clear that such air strikes would be against the enemy positions and not in support of whatever South Vietnamese forces may remain in Cambodia after the American units leave.

Lam Reports Crossings

By PHILIP SHABECOFF

Special to The New York Times

JAKARTA, Indonesia, May 18 — Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam of South Vietnam said tonight that United States soldiers as well as South Vietnamese soldiers had been crossing the Laotian border in "hot pursuit" of enemy forces for several years.

In an interview here, Mr. Lam said that troops had been allowed to cross both the Laotian and the Cambodian borders when in actual combat with enemy forces.

"Not only our troops but American troops as well," he added.

An aide of Mr. Lam, who



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Tran Van Lam

was present for the interview, interrupted to say, "Of course we cannot speak for the Americans, only for ourselves." The Foreign Minister just smiled.

In Jakarta for Talks

Mr. Lam, who was in Jakarta for the Asian foreign ministers' conference on Cambodia during the weekend, first disclosed Saturday night that, for years, South Vietnamese troops had made shallow penetrations into Laos in pursuit of the enemy.

The Foreign Minister asserted that South Vietnam has had no troops in Laos and that it had never massed troops along the border for an attack into Laos.

"When it happens we have a fight near a border area we pursue the enemy," he said. "We can't always stop to check if we have crossed the border. But we have not actually conducted operations in Laos."

The Foreign Minister noted that the frontier area between South Vietnam and Laos is often wild, uninhabited country, and that the border is often uncertain. The aide said that there were two sets of maps of the Vietnam-Laos border, both

made by the French but showing different lines.

Mr. Lam said that there had been "quite a few" battles in this unclear border area and that undoubtedly there had been many cases where South Vietnamese forces had chased enemy troops across the border "for a number of years."

"The Ashau Valley is a typical example," he said, referring to an area where United States marines have fought a number of bitter battles. "If you look at the map you can see how hard it is to tell where the line is between Vietnam and Laos."

Mr. Lam reiterated that the South Vietnamese had only pursued enemy troops across the border into Laos but had never "attacked" across the border.

"There is a big difference between a unit in a firefight following the enemy, trying to stay in contact, and a mass attack where men are gathered and sent on a planned assault," he said.

Laotian Town Threatened

VIENTIANE, Laos, May 18 (AP)—Government troops have repulsed a North Vietnamese patrol that attacked a little more than a mile west of Saravane in the Bolovens Plateau, informants reported today. Saravane itself appeared in danger of direct attack. It is the only Government-held town on Highway 23, which in that area is among the many routes that make up the Ho Chi Minh Trail of enemy supply lines through Laos from North Vietnam.

Officials here have said that North Vietnamese forces moving out of Cambodia ahead of allied troops from South Vietnam have begun to stream into the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos, possibly to replenish food supplies. The plateau is a rice-growing area.

North Vietnamese troops aiding the Pathet Lao in the civil war attacked Government outposts last week in four areas west and southwest of Saravane. Civilians in the town have been evacuated.