

FREE SAIGON HAND IN CAMBODIA SEEN

Laird, in London, Says U.S.
Won't Curb South Vietnam
After American Pullout

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LONDON, June 23—Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that South Vietnamese forces would be free to operate anywhere in Cambodia after June 30.

That date, a week from today, is the deadline set by President Nixon for the withdrawal of American Troops now in Cambodia. Mr. Laird said the deadline would definitely be met.

But he said he would not want to put any limit on South Vietnamese actions. The Communists, he indicated, might seek "sanctuaries" anywhere in Cambodia, and Saigon's forces should be able to attack them.

Nixon's Words Recalled

Mr. Laird's replies to questions at a London news conference appeared to carry somewhat farther the gradual shift of American policy toward allowing the South Vietnamese free rein in Cambodia.

On May 8, at his news conference a week after ordering American forces into Cambodia, President Nixon was asked whether his June 30 deadline applied to South Vietnamese ground troops. He said

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no, but he added:

"I would expect that the South Vietnamese would come out approximately at the same time that we do, because when we come out our logistical support and air support will also come out."

The Saigon Government then said repeatedly and forcefully that it must have the right to continue attacking within Cambodia after June 30. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky said the notion of withdrawal of its forces by a fixed date was "a silly argument of silly people."

On June 3, President Nixon said that the activity of South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia "after their withdrawal from the sanctuaries" would "be determined by the actions of the enemy."

Today's comments by Mr. Laird were consistent with that modified Presidential view. The Defense Secretary simply made more explicit American willingness, now, to let South Vietnamese troops move about Cambodia to attack the enemy anywhere.

However, American military and diplomatic analysts in Saigon have expressed the belief that—with the exception of several thousand soldiers—most South Vietnamese troops would be withdrawn from Cambodia within a few days after June 30. Officials have suggested that South Vietnam may attempt to keep open Route 1, which links Saigon with Phnompenh, and station strong forces along the border to be in position to strike again if the enemy attempts to resume operations there.

Tour of Bases Ended

Mr. Laird was in London today after two weeks of meetings and visits to bases in Europe. His news conference, in the American Embassy, touched on many topics but most significantly on Cambodia.

"Every American ground combat troop will be out of Cambodia on June 30," Mr. Laird said.

"There is one thing we have insisted on in this Administration, and that is that every timetable should be met. We are doing our best to restore the credibility of the Defense Department.

"The South Vietnamese will be free to operate in Cambodia in the sanctuary areas and in this kind of a combat role."

Mr. Laird was asked whether his phrase "sanctuary areas" meant the part of Cambodia bordering South Vietnam, where the American operations have taken place. He replied:

"I can't state what areas will be used as havens by the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong. But I would not want to draw up any limit on South Vietnamese ground forces so far as attacking any sanctuaries that now exist or may come into being in the future. I do not believe that would help in the Vietnamization program or in protecting American or South Vietnamese troops."

Policy Shift Is Possible

Most observers on the scene in Cambodia believe the South Vietnamese will continue to require American air and logistical support for any actions there. If so, indefinite South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia would mean a change in the policy President Nixon indicated on May 8.

One significant question will be whether South Vietnamese forces in Cambodia will have any American advisers. There could conceivably have been some significance in Mr. Laird's statement today that every American "ground combat troop"—a phrase that has sometimes been taken, as excluding advisers—would be out by June 30.

The Defense Secretary predicted that the tactical successes of the American operation in Cambodia, the seizure of supplies, would lead to longer-term strategic achievements—the advancing of Vietnamization and American troop withdrawal from Vietnam and the reduction of American casualties.