

LAIRD DENIES U. S. MADE AIR STRIKES TO AID CAMBODIANS

Asserts Jet Attack at Skoun Was Aimed at Interdicting Foe's Sea Supply Route

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 6 — Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird reiterated today the Nixon Administration's contention that American planes were not giving close air support to Cambodian troops despite eyewitness press reports to the contrary.

In a surprise Pentagon news conference this morning, Mr. Laird said bombing by American jets yesterday, 900 feet in front of a Cambodian battalion, was part of a general interdiction campaign aimed at protecting American forces in South Vietnam. Yesterday's bombing at Skoun, he said, was aimed at preventing the Vietnamese communists from reopening sea supply routes through Cambodian coastal towns.

"That particular area," Mr. Laird said, "is very much related to the opening up of the sea area for supplies and so forth, and I would merely state that the decision was made by the commanders in the field that it was an important interdiction mission to destroy the, ah, in this case, I believe it was personnel."

Cites 'Over-All Program'

"These interdiction missions are flown when it is felt that the personnel is of sufficient magnitude, or the supplies, or the build-up, or it does have an effect on the over-all program which we have in Vietnam," he continued.

Skoun is a road-junction town 35 miles northeast of Pnompenh, the Cambodian cap-

ital. The nearest coastal town, Kompong Som, the port formerly known as Sihanoukville, is 80 miles southwest of Pnompenh. Mr. Laird did not explain how Skoun could be connected with coastal supply routes.

According to a dispatch of The Associated Press, a Cambodian captain called in American jets to bomb and napalm an enemy force that had halted an attack by his battalion aimed at retaking Skoun.

In normal military terminology, interdiction is the bombing of rear area supply lines or enemy troops that are not engaged with friendly forces. Close air support, on the other hand, is the bombing of an enemy force that is in contact with allied troops.

Mr. Laird was asked, in light of what happened at Skoun, how he could continue to maintain that the Adminis-

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tration was not providing close air support for the Cambodians.

"It depends on what you refer to as interdiction, I think. I believe it is [interdiction]," he said. "It's very difficult to get these forces together in large numbers and to get concentrations of supplies. The VC and the North Vietnamese are now following a policy of trying to concentrate their supplies and their build-up of supplies, materiel and men around population centers, and you have to have forward air controls so that you can be in a position where you protect civilians."

Mr. Laird's comments today appeared to be another attempt by the Administration to ward off charges that it is providing the Cambodians with close air support, which would be prohibited by the Cooper-Church Amendment, attached by the Senate to the Foreign Military Sales Act earlier this summer, but not yet accepted by the House.

Designed to block a step-by-step increase in an American military commitment to Cambodia, as took place in Vietnam, The amendment specifically forbids the use of American planes for "any combat activity in the air above Cambodia in support of Cambodian forces."

Mr. Laird made clear today that the Administration's definition of interdiction bombing in Cambodia to protect Americans in South Vietnam encompasses virtually all of Cambodia, or along the sanctuary areas, or along the river route."

He acknowledged that there would be "certainly ancillary benefits" for the Cambodians in this bombing, but did not specify what these benefits would be."

A Pentagon Explanation

Asked to explain the difference between Mr. Laird's "ancillary benefits" and close air support, Jerry W. Friedheim, a Pentagon spokesman, said:

"The difference is how it looks to the Cambodians and how it looks to us. How it looks to the Cambodians is that these ancillary benefits are direct support for his troops. It looks to us like an interdiction campaign conducted in the context of our interdiction operations aimed at protecting the safety and security of our forces in South Vietnam and the Vietnamization program and keeping our casualties down and so forth."

Mr. Laird also denied telling Congressmen that American troops would be out of combat in South Vietnam by May of 1971. Representative Clark MacGregor, the Republican Sen-

atorial candidate in Minnesota, opposing former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, has been quoting Mr. Laird to this effect.

Mr. Laird said he had deliberately avoided giving anyone a timetable for ending American involvement in the war. He explained that he had, however, both in public and in private meetings with Congressmen many times described the various phases of the Vietnamization program.

Phase One ends in May of 1971 and its end, Mr. Laird has said, will entail the handing over of "ground combat responsibility" to the South Vietnamese. Mr. Laird has never defined what "ground combat responsibility" means.

"Now if anyone wants to draw conclusions and draw up their own timetables based upon these broad, general applications of the Vietnamization program, they are doing that on their own," Mr. Laird said.