

JAN 14 1971

## Laird Bars Airlift Plan

By WILLIAM BEECHER

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 13 —

A recent request by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that American transport planes and helicopters be permitted to help ferry ammunition and South Vietnamese reinforcements to Saigon's forces operating deep in Cambodia has been rejected by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird.

Such use of aircraft, the Joint Chiefs argued, was not specifically barred either by President Nixon's pledge not to use American ground troops or military advisers in Cambodia or by a similar prohibition recently written into the supplemental military aid bill by Congress.

But, qualified sources say, Mr. Laird turned down the request on the ground that it would violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the ban on American troops in Cambodia.

According to the sources Mr. Laird made his decision shortly before his departure last week for appraisal of progress of the war effort in Vietnam, with

Continued on Page 12, Column 1

12

C

THE NEW YORK TIMES, T

## CAMBODIA AIRLIFT BARRED BY LAIRD

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

stops in France and Thailand.

Defense Department sources say the Defense Secretary discussed the Cambodian situation at some length with senior American commanders in Saigon. They say he was particularly interested in whether further deterioration of the military situation in Cambodia might interfere with plans to continue or step up American troop withdrawals from South Vietnam.

Mr. Laird sent Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, on an unscheduled visit to Pnompenh

to assess the situation there.

South Vietnamese forces are now helping Cambodian troops in an effort to drive North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops from blocking positions along Route 1, linking Saigon and Pnompenh, and Route 4, connecting the Cambodian capital with its major seaport of Kompong Som.

On military grounds, some Administration planners say, the Joint Chiefs' transport proposal made sense. The relatively small South Vietnamese Air Force is sorely pressed to provide cargo transports and troop-carrying helicopters for its forces spread throughout South Vietnam and Cambodia.

But as in so many proposals, political and foreign policy considerations could not be ignored, and in this case proved overriding.

After checking with his for-

eign policy advisers Mr. Laird turned down the proposal. He then notified the State Department and the White House of his decision.

"Had Mr. Laird decided to go along with the military on this," one Defense Department source said, "He would have informed State and the National Security Council staff, with sufficient time for them to register objections. In that instance, the issue might well have escalated all the way up to the President."

A State Department official said that while a literal reading of the law would not preclude the use of planes in ferrying troops or supplies, "the public might not understand this nice distinction."

He continued: "So long as American aircraft do not have to land on Cambodian soil to fulfill their supporting role, it's

O.K. They can drop supplies by parachute, perform close fire-support missions, engage in wide-ranging reconnaissance. But if they land, they are putting combat-type personnel on the ground, and that's a definite no-no."

A Pentagon official attempted to define the limitation more narrowly. "We can still fly medical evacuation missions in support of the South Vietnamese in Cambodia," he said. "And we have flown supply planes into Pnompenh with military aid for the Cambodians. I wouldn't foreclose the possibility of flying supplies in to help the Vietnamese in some future operation, if they can handle the situation themselves. But we'd much prefer them to do it themselves."

But he appeared to be in a minority in his interpretation of Mr. Laird's decision.