

U.S. IS NOW FLYING COMBAT MISSIONS FOR LAOS TROOPS

Helicopter Gunships Raiding Enemy and His Supplies on Ho Chi Minh Trail

NEW STEP-UP IN AIR WAR

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White House Says Its Policy Barring Use of Ground Forces Is Unchanged

By The Associated Press

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 19—A further enlargement of the United States air role in Indochina was reported here today as official sources said American helicopter gunships were flying combat missions in Laos in direct support of Laotian ground troops.

The informants said Army, Air Force and Marine helicopter gunships had been supporting the Laotian troops for some time and had been attacking enemy troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through southeastern Laos.

Disclosure of this helicopter activity in Laos followed reports yesterday that United States helicopter gunships were attacking enemy forces in Cambodia in support of an allied drive to reopen a major Cambodian supply route.

[The White House acknowledged a recent step-up in American air operations in Cambodia, but insisted that Administration policy had not changed from the guidelines laid down by President Nixon last summer forbidding the use of combat troops or advisers to aid Cambodian forces. In Phnompenh, the Cambodian high command reported that all but 10 miles of the highway to the sea had been cleared by allied troops. Pages 3 and 5]

The informants here said the United States was conducting one of the biggest aerial campaigns of the war in Laos, using B-52 bombers, tactical fighter-bombers, gunships and reconnaissance aircraft with special secret equipment.

The aim, they said, is to slow the flow of North Vietnamese troops and war matériel into Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam and to prevent the enemy forces from establishing sanctuaries in the three countries.

The United States command said 13 helicopters had been

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lost over Laos since last March 10, when it began reporting aircraft losses in Laos.

Yesterday, in acknowledging American helicopter activity in Cambodia, the command said that two helicopter carriers had been stationed in the Gulf of Siam. As for their mission, the command said only that they were staging what it described as interdiction missions against enemy lines and supplying allied troops operating in Cambodia.

The command has defined interdiction as destruction or neutralization of enemy potential before it can be used against allied forces. Direct combat support, it says, implies close coordination with ground

troops in combat with the enemy.

However, reports from the scene yesterday said American helicopter strikes against the enemy were called in by a Cambodian officer.

Today the command issued what it described as a clarification of a Defense Department statement yesterday on the role of the helicopter gunships in Cambodia. That statement said South Vietnamese reinforcements for the allied drive in Cambodia had been transported into the area by United States helicopters.

"This has not been done," the command said, "although it is within the guidelines laid down for United States air power to prevent the re-establishment of [enemy] sanctuaries in Cambodia."