

LAIRD JUSTIFIES WIDENED AIR WAR TO AID CAMBODIANS

He Says Nixon Doctrine and
Aid Bill Provide Backing
for Step-Up in Support

TERMS EFFORT CRUCIAL

Secretary Asserts Only Use
of Ground Troops Is Barred

—Senator Asks Inquiry
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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20 — Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird today invoked the two-year-old Nixon Doctrine and a recent military aid bill to provide the rationale and authority for the expanded use of American air power in Cambodia.

Mr. Laird said that after returning Friday from a tour of Southeast Asia he reported to the President that such air activity in Cambodia was "crucial to the success" of the program of American troop withdrawals from South Vietnam.

At a Pentagon news conference, Mr. Laird did not repeat recent White House and Pentagon disclaimers of any change in policy in the use of helicopters to provide fire support supplies and reinforcements to South Vietnamese troops fighting in Cambodia. But he abandoned the term "interdiction," which has been used in the past to mean the permissible efforts to cut off the flow of enemy supplies and personnel. He used instead a broader term, "air power" and thus appeared to be acknowledging a change.

Aid in Route 4 Battle

Broadened American air support is being provided for South Vietnamese and Cambodian troops attempting to drive North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces from blocking positions along Route 4, which connects Phnompenh with its seaport. Helicopters operating from two American vessels off the Cambodian coast, as well as from South Vietnam, have been providing much of this expanded support.

Mr. Laird recalled that the Nixon Doctrine, first outlined by the President in Guam in 1969, stressed United States readiness to provide "material assistance and air and sea assistance" to Asian allies while encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their defense. "That is precisely what is happening today in Cambodia," he said.

And in "overwhelmingly" passing a \$1-billion military aid supplemental bill last month, he said, Congress proscribed only the use of American ground combat troops and military advisers in Cambodia. He insisted the Administration was living up to the "letter and spirit" of that ban.

But at least one Congressional critic was not convinced. Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, who was co-author of the restrictive language in the bill Mr. Laird mentioned, called today for

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prompt hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to determine "whether the intent of Congress—not to expand our involvement in Cambodia as we did in Vietnam—is being respected in current operations there."

Mr. Laird called his news conference to report on the findings of his trip to Paris, Bangkok and Saigon. But he quickly became caught up in a flurry of questions over whether the Administration was creating a "credibility gap" in describing air operations in Cambodia as representing no change in policy.

He conceded that President Nixon said June 30 that there would thereafter be "no United States air or logistics support" to South Vietnam operating in Cambodia.

But he tried to put a time limitation on the President's words. Mr. Nixon was referring to withholding direct air support from the South Vietnamese as they finished their operations in Cambodian sanctuaries "prior to the rainy season," Mr. Laird said. Such air support was not provided during that phase by the United States, he added.

"We did, however, use air power in Cambodia, and we have continued to use it, although it was not directly related to the South Vietnamese sanctuary operation," he said.

This air power, he continued, was applied against enemy forces and supplies moving through Cambodia "towards" South Vietnam, where they could be used against American troops there.

Insisting he did not want to get involved in "semantics," Mr. Laird then declared: "We will use air power, and as long as I am serving in this job, I will recommend that we use air power to supplement the South Vietnamese forces, as far as the air campaign in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia" is concerned.

The purpose, he said, is to keep down American casualties as United States troops continue to withdraw from South Vietnam and to permit the turning over of major combat responsibility there to the South Vietnamese.

— Asked About Aid to Lon Nol

He was asked whether, if it appeared that the Government of Premier Lon Nol in Cambodia was on the verge of falling, he would recommend the return of American troops there to turn the tide.

"No, there are no such plans," he said. "We will not — and I repeat it again, not — commit United States ground combat forces to Cambodia directly or indirectly."

Under questioning, Mr. Laird said he believed that the Congressional ban on ground combat troops or advisers would not preclude the dispatch of such noncombat personnel as military communications of hospital units.

But he quickly added, "I don't want to give the impression that we have plans to go beyond the military delivery teams which we will have supervising" the receipt in Cambodia of American military aid materials.

There are now about 12 military men in Phnompenh overseeing such shipments of weapons, he said.

Asked whether there were inhibitions of any kind on the use of American air power in Cambodia, Mr. Laird said there were "certain controls" written into the operational orders. But he declined to discuss them.

To a question whether the expanded American air activity was being justified by the implications of the Nixon Doctrine and the lack of a specific preclusion by Congress, Mr. Laird answered:

"You are correct in both cases."

Mr. Laird said that the United States still had hopes for a negotiated settlement in Paris. But unless the representatives of North Vietnam and the Vietcong show a "willingness to participate in meaningful negotiations, we cannot anticipate any early end to all the fighting in Southeast Asia."

Report Is Discounted

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 20 — A spokesman for the United States command said today there was nothing new about a report yesterday that the United States was using helicopters for direct combat support of Laotian Government troops. The report, by The Associated Press, was published in The New York Times today.

The command, the spokesman said, has reported the use of helicopters for all kinds of support in Laos since last March 10.