

U.S. OFFICIALS SAY ALLIED DRIVE IS ON IN AREA NEAR LAOS

No Decision on Crossing Line
Is Reported Made—News
Is Blacked Out in Saigon

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By TERENCE SMITH

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 1 — Officials here reported today that a major new allied operation involving thousands of South Vietnamese and American troops was under way in the northwest corner of South Vietnam.

The officials, who are not directly involved in the planning, said the new thrust was aimed at concentrations of enemy troops and supplies in the jungled, mountainous area west of the old Marine Corps base at Khesanh.

They indicated that a decision remained to be made whether the South Vietnamese units that were leading the attack would cross the Laotian border in an effort to sever the network of Communist supply lines that runs through southern Laos.

Laos Remains Opposed

In Vientiane, Laos, a military spokesman repeated his country's opposition to any military incursion but indicated that Laotian troops were in no position to do anything if one should take place.

While Washington and the command in Saigon continued their official silence on all military actions in northern South Vietnam—a news blackout has been in effect for four days—Premier Aleksei N. Kosygin charged in Moscow that an "outrageous invasion" of southern Laos was under way.

Tass, the official Soviet press agency, reported that the Premier had in a speech at a Kremlin dinner for a high-level Syrian delegation, denounced the United States as the author of

"The Soviet Government cannot help giving serious attention to the further aggravation of the situation in Indochina were an outrageous invasion of the southern provinces of Laos is under way," Tass reported Mr. Kosygin had said.

Charge by Hanoi

The Premier's statement followed a charge by the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris that the United States was escalating the war in Laos. A statement issued by the delegation described the situation in Indochina as "extremely tense."

The same charge was echoed in an editorial in Nhan Dan, the official Hanoi newspaper, which asserted that the United States and South Vietnam were "feverishly preparing further steps of war expansion and escalation" in southern Laos.

The Laotian town of Tche-

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pone, directly west of Khesanh, is known to be a principal staging area and supply base for the 35,000 to 40,000 North Vietnamese troops estimated to be operating in the southern part of Laos.

South Vietnamese ground troops are reportedly carrying the thrust of the assault west of Khesanh, backed by American fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships. The officials said the principal role of the American ground units would be to provide internal security in South Vietnam in the wake of the advancing South Vietnamese troops.

Worry About Build-Up

The United States military command in Saigon has been concerned for nearly a year with the continued build-up of fresh, well-equipped enemy troops in the area just below the western edge of the demilitarized zone along the line that separates North Vietnam and South Vietnam. These troops pose a direct threat, in the command's view, to the coastal cities of Quangtri, Danang and Hue. The responsibility for patrolling much of the northwestern corner of the country was turned over last spring to the South Vietnamese First Division, which is generally regarded as the best South Vietnamese unit.

In a broadcast on the Hanoi radio, the Pathet Lao, the Communist-led group in Laos, accused the United States and its allies of massing "tens of thousands of Saigon and U. S. troops" in the northern part of South Vietnam. It also charged that intelligence forays had already been conducted deep into southern Laos to prepare for an invasion.

Officials at the State and Defense Departments refused to comment on any of the Communist charges, or to discuss the reports of a new allied operation.

Embargo Acknowledged

A Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, finally did acknowledge, however, that the military command had imposed an embargo on correspondents in Saigon.

In addition, Mr. Friedheim reported that North Vietnamese troop strength in Laos had increased in recent months by 5,000 men, to a number estimated at 70,000 men. Other sources reported that about half this number was in the southern area; the balance is operating in the Plaine des Jarres area of northern Laos.

Meanwhile, the Senate Republican leader, Hugh Scott of

Pennsylvania, said that he expected that the Administration would make a disclosure on the Laotian situation fairly soon. He said the allied forces operating near the border were largely South Vietnamese, adding: "I understand that the American forces stop at the border."

Kosygin Denounces U.S.

MOSCOW, Feb. 1 — Premier Kosygin said tonight that "an outrageous invasion" of the southern provinces of Laos was under way and said that it further aggravated the situation in Indochina.

No details were given by the Soviet leader in his speech, which was largely devoted to the Middle East, in honor of the visiting Syrian Premier, Lieut. Gen. Hafez al-Assad.

It was unclear whether Mr. Kosygin was accepting Western reports as fact or had his own independent information.

"The Soviet Government could not help but give serious attention to the further aggravation of the situation in Indochina," he said, "where American imperialism is expanding, with the help of its Saigon hirelings, the military operations against Cambodia; where an outrageous invasion of the southern provinces of Laos is under way, and where the gross violation of the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is continuing." A summary was made public by Tass, the Soviet press agency.

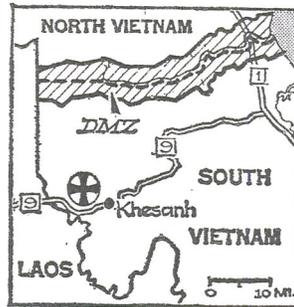
Hanoi Expects Big Drive

HONOI, North Vietnam, Feb. 1 (Agence France-Presse)—Hanoi expects a huge intervention in southern Laos shortly by the South Vietnamese Army, backed by the United States Air Force, Nhan Dan, the Communist party daily, indicated today.

The paper said "several thousand Thais" and South Vietnamese commandos had been preparing the ground for such a drive by operating in Laos since the beginning of January.

At the same time, the Americans were reported stepping up bombing on both sides of the demilitarized zone along the border of North Vietnam and South Vietnam, including the entire North Vietnamese province just north of it. According to military experts here, the United States was seeking to "widen the demilitarized zone" by intensive bombing on its northern and southern outskirts, to empty it and to cut off the North from the South by an impassable area.

Nhan Dan asserted that the Americans were preparing to displace the entire South Vietnamese population of the provinces of Quangtri and Thua-thien, near the demilitarized zone, and regroup it in the south of the country.



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A DRIVE NEAR LAOS:
 Region west of Khesanh (cross) was the scene of a major allied operation. Foe shelled Americans in areas of the cities shown underlined (bottom map).

The aim, according to Hanoi military experts, is to create a 60-mile-wide "free bombing" area for B-52 bombers and tactical aircraft on both sides of the 17th Parallel, roughly the dividing line between North and South.

In an editorial, the paper said the situation in Indochina was "very serious" and that the United States was stepping up the war and preparing new hostile acts against North Vietnam.

Nhan Dan noted that Western news agencies had on several

occasions reported the return to the Gulf of Tonkin of two Seventh Fleet aircraft carriers that had been involved in the drive by reopen Route 4 in Cambodia, linking Pnompenh with the coast.

Bunker to See Nixon

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 1 — Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker left Saigon today for a week of consultation with President Nixon and talks with officials at the Paris peace negotiations.