

TROOPS OF ALLIES MASS NEAR LAOS; CROSSING DENIED

Saigon Refuses to Comment
About 'Future Operations'
in Northwest Corner

ROAD TO BORDER OPENED

FEB 5 1971

U.S. Officers on the Scene
Say They Expect a Push
by South Vietnamese

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 4 — Thousands of American and South Vietnamese troops, supported by armored columns and planes, were moving near the Laotian border today in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam.

Official South Vietnamese spokesmen said none of their forces had crossed into Laos to strike at the North Vietnamese supply and infiltration trails and bases there. But they refused to comment on what they called "future operations."

American officers on the scene, in Quangtri Province, said they still expected the South Vietnamese troops to move directly against what is known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

Approval by Thieu

Informed sources here said that President Nixon had received advance approval from President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam to make the decision on whether to dispatch the South Vietnamese troops into Laos after the American troops had cleared the way. United States ground combat forces are barred by recently enacted legislation from entering Laos.

There was no word here on whether the South Vietnamese forces would in fact carry out what informed sources said was the original plan—to drive into Laos, destroy the vast stockpiles of enemy supplies believed hidden in thick jungle and then withdraw.

Some military sources said they had begun to suspect that President Nixon was having second thoughts about risking a political furor at home over "a widening of the war." The situation reportedly was discussed at a 20-minute meeting last night between President Thieu and Ambassador Samuel D. Berger, the senior American at the embassy in the absence of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who is in Washington.

9,000 American Troops

The sweep in the northwest, officially announced by the United States command early today after a six-day news blackout here, involves 9,000 Americans and 20,000 South Vietnamese soldiers.

At the same time, 20,000 other South Vietnamese soldiers were reportedly engaged in two new operations in Cambodia in one of the biggest campaigns there since the attacks against enemy supply bases by South Vietnamese and American troops last spring. The campaign, supported by American air power, was under way

Continued on Page 10, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 1

to the west and northwest of Saigon.

The allied sweep in the northwest corner of the country is reported to have encountered little enemy resistance. The first two American deaths of the operation, which began last Saturday, were reported unofficially today. Military spokesmen in the field said that one American soldier died after he was wounded by an old American mine and that another had died in a booby-trap incident. The military command has officially reported that three Americans have been wounded.

American troops continued to repair roads leading to the Laotian border and to scour the countryside for enemy material and troops. A reconnaissance screen of American troops patrolled between the border and Khesanh, the old base where American Marines underwent a 77-day siege in 1968.

On opening Route 9 to the Laotian border, the American Army engineers set up a large red and white sign 100 yards from the line.

"Warning, no U.S. personnel beyond this point," it read.

As American helicopter gunships moved overhead, South Vietnamese troops prepared to take up positions in the border regions.

American and South Vietnamese officials have kept in close touch on the operation, which, like most, was planned to be carried out in several stages. As explained by military sources, the first staged called for Americans to clear the roads, repair airstrips, provide air cover and highway security, and airlift the South Vietnamese troops to the area.

The sources said the decision on a subsequent South Vietnamese attack on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was delayed until later.

By Monday and Tuesday, these sources began to suspect that President Nixon was beginning to consider whether it was politically wise, even though militarily significant, to proceed.

"He wants the long-term

benefit that would come from it — the destruction of those trail supplies," a reliable source reported. "But he delayed out of fear of short-term political furor over a widening of the war even though there was no intention of using American ground troops."

Dual Purpose Suspected

Accordingly, there is some suspicion here that while the news blackout stemmed from military reasons it also served political purposes.

The official military briefers did not go into these questions during the six days that reporters were under embargo here. Despite the running reports about the operation emanating from outside South Vietnam, they insisted that the embargo had been ordered by Gen Creighton W. Abrams, the American commander, alone in the interests of insuring the safety of American troops. They maintain that the small number of American casualties had proved the policy correct.

However, it was also argued here that President Nixon knew the story would trickle out during a long news blackout and wanted to see the political reaction at home before committing himself to the

final stage of a crossing into Laos.

Some military sources, outside the official briefers, expressed the view that the South Vietnamese should have attacked the trail on Sunday for maximum surprise. They said that by now the North Vietnamese had either moved many of their stockpiles or had strengthened their defenses.

With virtually no enemy resistance, helicopter gunships reportedly roamed the skies over the northernmost province of Quangtri in search of enemy supply depots, striking one suspected ammunition storage area about nine miles south of Khesanh. The gunships were said to have destroyed a camouflaged truck.

An American infantry unit also reportedly found 40 rounds of 105-m.m. ammunition in a bunker near Khesanh, apparently rounds once seized from American supplies. The command said that four enemy soldiers had been killed in the operation, known as Dewey Canyon II.

The only direct enemy activity reported by the command was what it described as ineffective rocket attacks on two American support bases, known as Carroll and Fuller, both in the mountains northeast of Khesanh.

At the old marine base, where engineers were still at work on a new airstrip, the first C-130 cargo plane arrived. It will be followed by a steady flow of the four-engine planes bearing war supplies.

The entire operation began early last Saturday when elements of the First Brigade of the Fifth Infantry Division Mechanized left Quangtri combat base, moving briefly north on Route 1 and then turning west on Route 9 toward the Laotian border. The column of tanks and armored troop carriers moved first to a small base known as Vandergrift, about midway between Quangtri and Khesanh.

Cargo planes disgorging machinery and supplies to support the American side of the operation. South Vietnamese troops were flying into their rear base at Dongha, six miles north of the Quangtri base. There the First South Vietnamese Army Division was also at work, stockpiling material ranging from bulldozers to bandages in preparation for their move west.

B-52's See Action

At about the same time, three battalions of American troops were lifted into the Khesanh base, still strewn with the rubble of the siege of 1968. It was secured by airborne assault units without enemy resistance.

B-52 bombers went into action in the area on Saturday, attacking enemy bunkers and staging areas a few miles west of Giolinh, just south of the demilitarized zone straddling the

border between North and South Vietnam.

From bases known as Bastogne, Veghel and Zan, south of Khesanh, elements of the 101st Airborne Division sent artillery fire into the Ashau Valley and presumably into Laos.

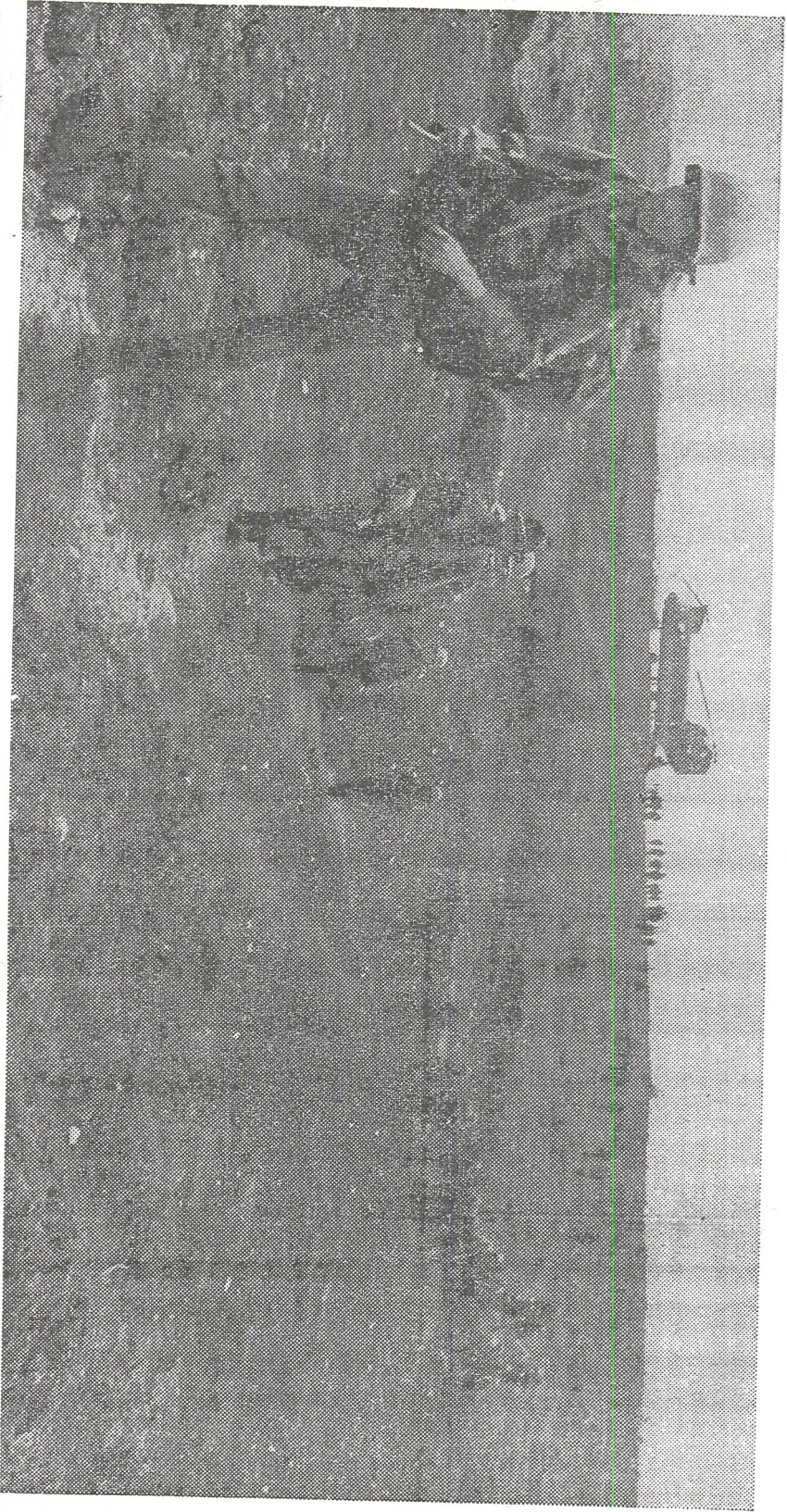
On Sunday, engineers completed work on the twisting Route 9 to Khesanh. As a cold wind blew across the peaks that ring the high plateau on which Khesanh sits, long lines of Army trucks loaded with ammunition sat parked on the old runway.

"They told us we were going to clean out all the Communists so the South Vietnamese could land and move into Laos," said one G.I.

On Monday, the Americans moved farther west when advance units established a forward support base only three miles east of the Laotian border at Langvei. An American reconnaissance force of about 700 men moved even farther west later in the day. They pushed to the border itself to set up a "screen."

On Tuesday, work continued on the road west of Langvei to the border, two enemy soldiers were reportedly killed north west of Khesanh, and American units attacked a suspected enemy bunker about 10 miles south of Khesanh. Two B-52 missions attacked targets near the base.

By Wednesday, the Americans were firmly entrenched in their new positions.



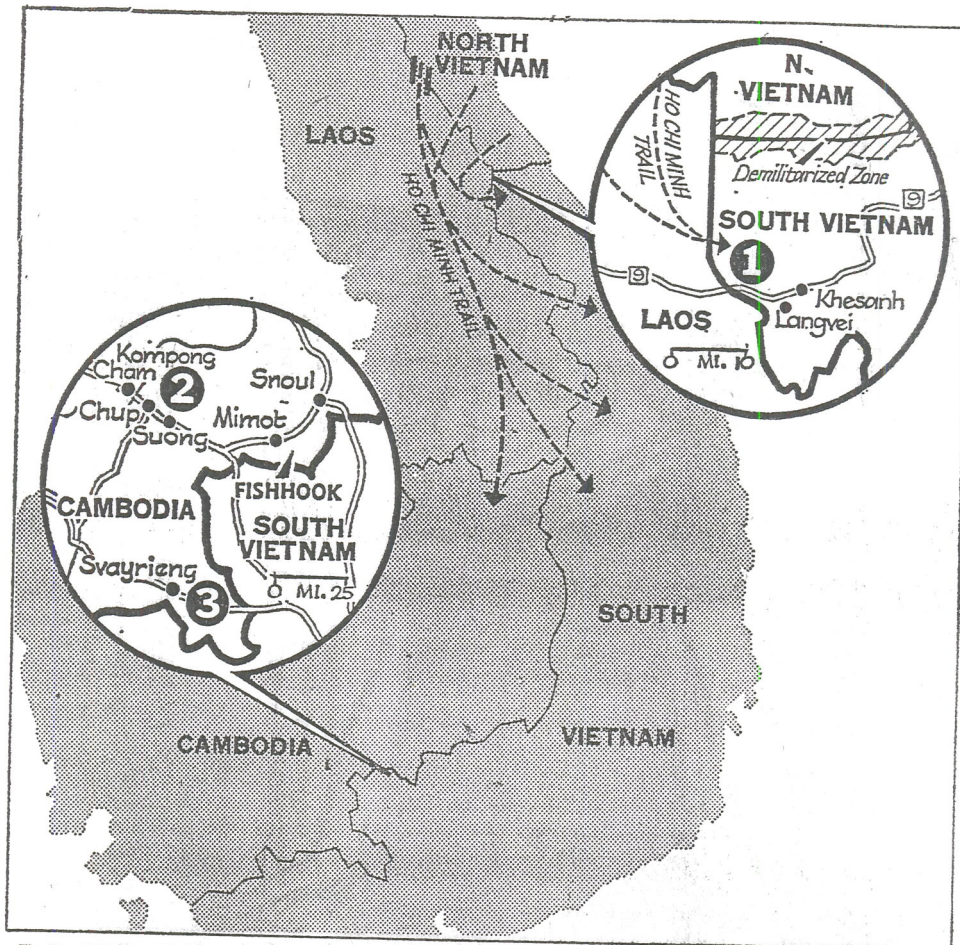
FOOT SOLDIERS: South Vietnamese, after leaving the Chinook copter at rear, continue journey toward Khesanh on paths leading to main highway

Associated Press



Associated Press

ENGINEERING PROJECT: Task of repairing bridge at right was assigned to U.S. Army group that moved in bulldozer and armored vehicles. Scene is on Route 9 near Khesanh.



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Allied troops were deployed along Laotian border in northwestern corner of South Vietnam (1). Saigon troops pressed new operations in Cambodia, one aimed at foe's positions at Chup plantation (2) and the other farther south near Svayrieng (3).