

U.S. OFFICIALS FEEL NIXON HAS DECIDED ON STRIKE IN LAOS

Timing of South Vietnamese
Drive Is Said to Depend
on Pace of Build-up

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 5 —

Strong indications emerged here that the Administration had decided to go ahead with a strike by South Vietnamese troops against enemy supply lines in southern Laos.

The Administration's official spokesmen continued, for the seventh consecutive day, to refuse any public comment on the possibility of such a strike, but officials not directly concerned with the planning said they believed the White House had decided within the last 48 hours to go ahead.

Roads and Bridges Rebuilt

The timing of the strike, the officials said, would depend upon how quickly the nearly 30,000 allied soldiers massed along the Laotian border could complete "stage one" of the new operation, called Dewey Canyon II.

In the initial stage, which began early last Saturday, the troops have swept westward across the northernmost tip of South Vietnam, scouring the countryside for enemy troops, rebuilding roads and bridges and reoccupying long-deserted allied outposts such as Khesanh and Langvei.

According to reports from the field, this work was still under way today. [Page 4.]

Army engineers were working around the clock to rehabilitate the airstrip at Khesanh and strengthen the bunkers that 6,000 American Marines occupied during a 77-day siege at the outpost three years ago.

Secure Base Sought

Little enemy resistance has been encountered in the first stage of the operation, despite intelligence reports that up to nine regiments of North Vietnamese regulars were in the rugged mountains along the border.

According to a White House source, the operation was conceived as a two-stage project, with the final decision to go into Laos hinging, among other considerations, on the amount of fighting encountered in the first stage.

The military planners reportedly considered it necessary to establish a secure base in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam before deciding whether to begin the second stage of the operation.

At least one intelligence report indicated that American casualties might be high in the early phase of the operation. In-

Continued on Page 5, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 1

stead, only a few casualties have resulted, from booby traps and scattered ground fire.

A second concern of the Administration was said to be the domestic political ramifications of a strike into Laos. A reliable source reported that this question was discussed at length at meetings at the White House during the week and that a consensus had gradually emerged that so long as American troops were not committed on the ground, the public would accept the strike as permissible within the context of the Administration's program of Vietnamization, or gradually turning over the bulk of the fighting to the South Vietnamese forces.

The State Department spokesman Robert J. McCloskey, described the operation in that context today in a briefing for newsmen. Asked what the objective of the operation was, he said it "has to do with the guaranteeing of the freedom of the President to continue his program of withdrawing United States soldiers from South Vietnam."

Ground Troops Barred

While they have refused to speculate on whether South Vietnamese forces might go into Laos, high Administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, have said publicly that American ground combat troops will not be used in Laos. They have pointedly refused, however, to rule out the use of full American air support for a South Vietnamese operation.

A sweep into Laos by either South Vietnamese or American troops would violate the much-abused 1962 Geneva agreement that declared the kingdom's official neutrality and forbade the presence of foreign troops. The Administration's defense for such a strike would presumably be based on the argument that the North Vietnamese have shatterered that aspect of the agreement by maintaining forces in eastern Laos for the last seven years.

Discussions about the new campaign have occupied much of President Nixon's time during the last several days. He met for 45 minutes today with Ellsworth Bunker, the United States Ambassador to South Vietnam, who arrived in Washington on Monday. The White House gave no details of the meeting except to say that the two men were joined by Henry A. Kissinger, the President's special adviser for national security.

Mr. Bunker is expected to depart Sunday for Saigon with a stop in Paris, where he will confer with the United States negotiating team at the peace talks.

The heightened speculation about allied actions in Laos has caused additional concern on Capitol Hill. A bipartisan group of seven Congressmen today introduced a bill designed to prevent American support for a South Vietnamese incursion into Laos.

Representative Michael Harrington, a Massachusetts Democrat and a co-sponsor, said the bill would prohibit any kind of support by the United States for military operations in Laos.

Although the bill seems likely to be altered in committee, its submission seemed to signal a renewed Congressional effort to restrict the President's war-making powers in Indochina.