

SCHEDULE

Widening Of War Denied

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Washington

The Nixon administration portrayed the American-backed South Vietnamese invasion of Laos yesterday as a limited operation designed to protect "the security and safety of American forces in South Vietnam."

"This limited operation is not an enlargement of the war," a statement issued by the State Department said, adding that the North Vietnamese have long used Southern Laos as a major supply route.

Reliable sources at the White House and State Department reported that the operational plans call for the South Vietnamese to remain in Laos for up to three months, in an effort to disrupt the flow of supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail for the remainder of the current dry season, which ends about May 1.

The sources insisted that no American ground combat forces or advisers would enter Laos, even if the military tide there should turn against the South Vietnamese troops.

JUSTIFICATION

The administration's justification of its use of U.S. air power to support the invasion was contained in an eight-point formal statement, and amplified in lengthy briefings for newsmen at the White House and at the State and Defense departments.

The statement and all the spokesmen stressed that the objective of the operation is to buy additional time for the South Vietnamese armed forces to improve themselves and to facilitate the withdrawal of American troops.

The administration also contended that the invasion

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of nominally neutral Laos was "fully consistent with international law," based on the right of South Vietnam to protect itself from threatened enemy attack.

A formal declaration to that effect was submitted to the United Nations Security Council by the Saigon government. A spokesman said the United States is considering the submission of a parallel statement.

CHALLENGE

A bipartisan group of senators immediately challenged the administration's contention that the operation did not constitute a widening of the war, but the initial reaction on Capitol Hill was wild compared to the furor that followed the U.S. move into Cambodia last spring.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana led the critics of the operation, describing it as a "deepening of the tragedy and an extension of the war."

"If it doesn't succeed," the Senator said, "it's quite possible it may bring about a reversal of the withdrawal policy."

Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania expressed support for the operation, predicting that if it succeeds in seriously disrupting the Communists' supply system in Southern Laos, "the enemy will have great difficulty in maintaining a sustained offensive (in South

Vietnam) until the end of the rainy season, in September or October."

Scott, who said he had been briefed on the details of the operation Sunday by Presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger, said he expects the South Vietnamese troops to operate in Laos "until May or June, whenever the wet season begins."

Other Democratic Senators denounced the invasion as an unwarranted extension of the fighting that would lead to further involvement by the United States in Indochina.

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota warned of the "enormously dangerous implications" for all the countries involved, and Senator Harold Hughes of Iowa charged that the operation "proves that the President has no plans for ending the war—only to widen it."

DECISION

At the White House, Presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler said that the basic decision to mount an operation into Laos had been made in January after Allied intelligence reported an unusually heavy concentration of Communist troops and supplies in Southern Laos.

He said the President had endorsed the idea of the operation at that time and that a final decision to go into Laos itself was made last week, apparently at a high-level meeting on Tuesday.

Despite news reports to the contrary, Ziegler insisted that there had been "no

starts and stops, no delays of any kind," in the planning and execution of the operation. He said the six-day news embargo that blacked out reports of the first phase of the operation had been designed to protect the security of the Allied forces "as they moved into a vulnerable area."

This was a reference to the northwestern corner of South Vietnam, where Allied intelligence expected heavy resistance from an estimated nine regiments of North Vietnamese regulars thought to be dug in along the Laotian border. As it developed, the allies encountered no significant enemy resistance.

Ziegler declined to say whether the President had set any geographical limits on the operation, or had decided on a termination date.

Other administration officials let it be known that the progress of the operation would be reviewed on a week-to-week basis, and that the duration would depend on events. They said the goal was more to disrupt the flow of enemy supplies than to capture them, as was the objective last spring in Cambodia.