

Newsmen Are Balked at

By Keyes Beech

KHE SANH (South Vietnam) — A conspiracy of secrecy unprecedented in the long and checkered history of the Indochina war cloaks the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos.

The Bamboo Curtain goes far beyond the scope of conventional military security. Nor can it be attributed to simple military bungling.

It appears to reflect what apparently is a master plan to keep coverage of the invasion to an absolute minimum. For sophistication and

thoroughness, present military control of the news tops anything yet seen in this war. This is not censorship in the ordinary sense. It is censorship by denying correspondents access to news sources and by restricting their movements.

It was as if all 29,000 troops involved in the operation — 20,000 South Vietnamese and 9000 Americans — were under orders to block newsmen in their attempts to cover the story. This applies to all echelons from generals to GIs, both American and South

Vietnamese.

ARVN (Army of South Vietnam) military police stopped newsmen from joining a South Vietnamese armored column as it pushed across the border yesterday. South Vietnamese army truck drivers headed for the border refused to give rides to American newsmen, saying, "No bao chi." Bao chi is the Vietnamese word for journalist.

American helicopter pilots who ferried the South Vietnamese into Laos were under strict orders not to take

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newsmen along or discuss where they were going.

When a Vietnamese cameraman employed by NBC stowed away on a helicopter and began filming the invasion, the American door gunner snatched his camera away and threw it out into the jungle. When the helicopter landed to discharge its troops, the cameraman, Hoang Trong Nghia, 35, a combat veteran, was forbidden to leave it.

"I thought he was going to throw me out on the way back so I offered him a cig-

aret," Nghia said later.

All Vietnamese military installations in western Quang Tri province, kickoff point for the invasion, were off limits to newsmen.

American officers flatly refused to discuss developments inside Laos — except for the U.S. air support role — on the ground it was a South Vietnamese affair. The South Vietnamese were, for the present at least, totally uncommunicative.

However, South Vietnamese commanders told Vietnamese newspapermen

they would be happy to let foreign newsmen cover the invasion and blamed the U.S. command for the secrecy.

The ban on correspondents going into Laos with invasion forces was a sharp departure from the practice followed during the Cambodian invasion last spring.

At that time correspondents were allowed to accompany South Vietnamese and American troops and had free use of helicopter transport when it was available.

U.S. military spokesmen have repeatedly emphasized

that no American ground troops or advisers have gone into Laos. So far as can be determined, this is true.

But as the invasion got under way there were at least 1200 American helicopter crewmen over Laos or on the ground at one time or another. In accordance with the Nixon administration's policy of unlimited air support, the South Vietnamese will continue to receive combat, logistics and medical evacuation support either by helicopters or fixed wing aircraft.