

Resistance Termed Light As Laos Drive Continues

By IVER PETERSON FEB 12 1971
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 11—South Vietnamese forces were reported pushing deeper into Laos today in the fourth day of their drive against enemy supply trails and bases. But it was said they had not yet encountered the kind of ground resistance that was expected when the push began on Monday.

Enemy antiaircraft fire along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, however, has been heavy. American pilots supporting the Government troops across the border say it has been the most intense they have ever encountered.

[In Paris, North Vietnamese and Vietcong delegates to the peace talks asserted that 10 American battalions were fighting in Laos. The United States delegation termed the accusation nonsense.]

At least six United States helicopters are known to have been shot down over Laos during the drive so far, as the pilots ferry South Vietnamese troops and supplies into regions prepared by the enemy for defense against American bombers.

A South Vietnamese spokesman said here today that since the preliminary phase of the operation began at the end of January with the reopening of the allied supply base at Khe-sanh, in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam, about 20 Government soldiers had been killed in combat. Enemy losses were put at about 60 dead.

Today no official reports were made here of any significant incidents in the last 24 hours.

American military spokesmen continued to refuse to describe the extent of the vast United States air, artillery and logistical support being provided the South Vietnamese, saying that to do so would help the enemy. Government spokesmen, citing the same reasons, declined to say where in Laos the South Vietnamese were.

There were reports yesterday that Government troops had taken the nearly abandoned Laotian town of Tchepone, about 25 miles from the border. But indications from the field today were that the troops were securing positions in the hills north and south of the valley town but had not yet entered it.

Tchepone, long believed to

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Resistance Reported Light in Laos Drive

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be a center of the North Vietnamese infiltration system to South Vietnam and Cambodia, is on Route 9, which also runs across the northern part of South Vietnam. Apparently because of the difficulty encountered in air missions over Laos, the South Vietnamese there, said to number 10,000, are understood to be clinging closely to the road and the surface resupply system it affords.

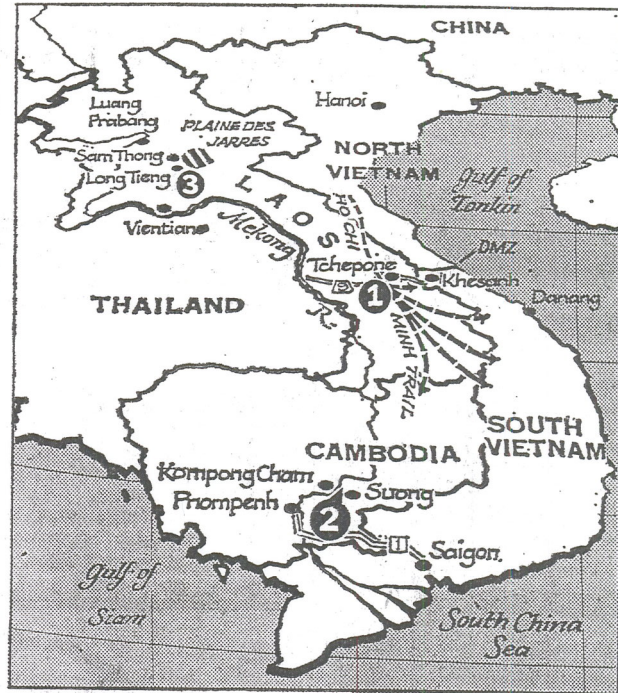
The United States effort is centered in Quangtri Province, just below the North Vietnamese border. It was there that the operation, involving 20,000 South Vietnamese and 9,000 Americans, began.

A new dirt airstrip at Khesanh that was supposed to handle four large cargo planes an hour to supply the operation in Laos has not worked out. After one C-130 plane landed and got stuck in the mud last week, the plan to use fixed-wing aircraft for resupply was abandoned for the present and the airstrip has become a parking lot for cargo helicopters.

The resulting increase in cargo truck traffic on Route 9, a dirt road, has overburdened it and has caused delays and losses.

Despite the thousands of United States troops guarding the road and the allied command posts along it, enemy snipers, sappers and mortar crews have been able to creep close enough to ambush convoys and attack allied positions.

The forward command post of the First Brigade, Fifth Infantry Division, which earlier had been in an open field near the border at Langvei, was moved back to safer ground at Khesanh Tuesday when enemy mortar and rocket fire began to strike the area.



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Saigon troops in Laos were reported deployed in hills north and south of Tchepone (1). South Vietnamese in sweep in Suong area (2) of Cambodia met with heavy enemy resistance. In northern Laos, foe's pressure on Long Tieng (3) caused thousands of civilians to flee.