

# LAIRD EXPECTING 'SOME TOUGH DAYS' IN LAOS CAMPAIGN

In Briefing for Cabinet, He  
Is Said to Foresee Rise  
in Enemy Resistance

## ROUTE 9 LIKELY TARGET

Intelligence Experts Depict  
a Build-Up Near Road—  
North Vietnam Raided

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 16—  
Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird advised President Nixon and members of the Cabinet today to expect "some tough days ahead" in the allied effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply line in southern Laos.

The Secretary was quoted as having said that the South Vietnamese troops on the ground in Laos could expect to meet greater enemy resistance than they had so far in the eight-day-old operation.

[The Associated Press reported from Saigon that the United States command had announced that missile sites in North Vietnam had been attacked for the third day in a row.]

### Report to Cabinet

A detailed report of the progress of the Laos operation was given by Mr. Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers at an early morning Cabinet meeting at the White House.

Their remarks were summarized later at a briefing by Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary. Both men, according to Mr. Ziegler, reported that the operation "has been going very well" in its early stages.

Mr. Laird's concern about intensified fighting appeared to be based on recent intelligence reports of enemy troop build-ups in the area immediately north of Route 9, the muddy remnant of an old French highway along which the South Vietnamese troops have taken up positions.

### Rising Pressure Feared

According to allied intelligence specialists, several regiments of North Vietnamese forces have maneuvered into positions to the north of the road from which they can harass the South Vietnamese units as they move into Laos.

The intelligence analysts expect the Communists to increase their pressure on the South Vietnamese gradually in an effort to isolate and overrun some of their units. The

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North Vietnamese are reported also to have concentrated substantial artillery and anti-aircraft weapons in the area.

At the same time, the specialists say, the enemy is continuing efforts to send supplies south by executing what one White House official described as "an end run" to the west around the South Vietnamese. There are apparently no reliable indicators so far of how successful this has been.

Independent assessments of the operation have been virtually impossible since American reporters have been barred from the American helicopters that are supplying the South Vietnamese. A few newsmen have managed to obtain brief, first-hand looks at the situation from South Vietnamese aircraft.

The reporting has been equally difficult in Washington, where Administration spokesmen have confined themselves to generalities. No senior members of the Administration have submitted themselves to public questioning, although Mr. Laird and Mr. Rogers have briefed members of Congress in private session.

Privately, officials within the Government say that they expect some sort of North Vietnamese counterattack against the South Vietnamese inside Laos, since there seems to be no other feasible way for the Communists to continue to supply their troops to the south in Cambodia and South Vietnam.

"They have to try to break the South Vietnamese cordon," one senior official said. "Nothing else will keep their supply lines intact."

This reasoning leads many officials to doubt that the North Vietnamese will retaliate with a strike across the demilitarized zone along the line between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Such a strike would be costly, they reason and would not solve the problem of supplying the North Vietnamese troops operating in Cambodia and the southern half of South Vietnam.

### Report on Progress

A White House official said last night that in the first week of the operation the South Vietnamese had managed to sever about half the routes that make up the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The official who declined to be identified, said the operation was proceeding slowly because the South Vietnamese were constructing artillery bases inside Laos to provide cover for the advancing troops.

The official's description of the achievements of the first week was disputed by leading officers at the Pentagon.

"No responsible military person would make such a claim," one officer working on the operation said.

He asserted that the first part of the South Vietnamese force had penetrated about halfway across the area through which the network passes, "but this does not mean they have severed all the trails inside the area."

"At best, they have disrupted some of them," he said.

Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky of South Vietnam suggested last week that it might become necessary at some point for South Vietnamese troops to strike directly at supply and troop concentrations in the southern provinces of North Vietnam.

Administration officials here have stressed that no such operation is contemplated, but they have refused to rule out the possibility.