

S F EXAMINER

No. Viets Threaten Key Base

U.S. Copter Losses Soar

SAIGON — (UPI) — North Vietnamese troops today launched a heavy attack on a South Vietnamese firebase 12 miles inside Laos and drove off rescue helicopters with a blaze of anti-aircraft fire.

A relief column was battling along heavily mined Highway 9 in an attempt to save the base. The enemy held the road in two sectors.

Vientiane dispatches said the North Vietnamese also had driven off Laotian forces 35 miles west of Sepone in another phase of their winter offensive apparently aimed at blocking the South Vietnamese drive on that major resupply center.

Sepone is a main South Vietnamese objective.

Losses Soar

U.S. helicopter losses soared and the U.S. Command reported two huge \$2 million CH35 Sea Stallions lost in what a spokesman called the heaviest weekly toll in more than seven months.

Front dispatches indicated as many as eight or nine helicopters were lost or heavily damaged yesterday and today. The 12-day toll neared the 40 mark.

The U.S. Command said the weather improved today and U.S. helicopters flew 1100 sorties, an increase of 1000 over yesterday, when weather was bad. The Command reported good weather in the area today, indicating more U.S. air support.

UPI correspondent Kim Willenson reported from Vientiane that the Communists not only were attacking

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toward Sepone in southern Laos but had increased the tempo of their offensive in the north and shelled the big CIA military headquarters of Long Cheng in daylight for the first time.

Fear Expressed

The Communists also increased their pressure on the royal capital of Luang Prabang and for the first time Laotian generals expressed fear the North Vietnamese would try to capture it. The road between Vientiane and Luang Prabang was closed.

Deputy defense minister Prince Sisouk Na Champasack told the National Assembly in Vientiane that Laos faced a "grave" military situation created in part by the South Vietnamese incursion in an effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh supply trail and by the increased Communist attacks 300 miles to the north.

With the Communists increasing their attacks in both Laos and Cambodia, Saigon buzzed with rumors that the government was planning some sort of attack across the border into North Vietnam despite Hanoi's warnings such action could bring China into the war.

Bogged Down

Highway 9 leads westward from the city of Quang Tri in the northern sector of South Vietnam across Laos and into Sepone, hub of the Communist supply network through Laos. It runs just below the Demilitarized Zone and has come under heavy attack in South Vietnam.

The 16,000-man South Vietnamese force in Laos has moved mostly along Highway 9, slicing across three or more of the Communist supply roads, but has been bogged down by heavy resistance. Today's attack appeared to be of major proportions — the first such attack.

The highway is so vulnerable to attack and so heavily mined that convoys quit using it eight days ago, letting the forward forces depend on helicopter supply missions which braved anti-aircraft fire reported as intense as that over the German Ruhr in World War II.

'Heavy Contact'

The road is cut in two places and South Vietnamese admitted that if the relief convoy were to reach the paratroops and rangers at the fire base, 12 miles from the border, it would have to fight its way through.

Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam,

commander of the 16000-man invasion force, remained optimistic. He told UPI correspondent Kenneth Braddick: "We are having heavy contact but the operation is going well and we keep moving forward."

South Vietnamese helicopter pilots who arrived at Khe Sanh with seven wounded men aboard gave an inkling of the fierce anti-aircraft fire. They said they had been forced by the heavy fire to leave behind a number of bodies. They said some helicopters were unable to land inside Laos because of the heavy ground fire.

The main South Vietnamese armored force was about 17 miles inside Laos but unconfirmed reports today said an armored column had reached a point seven miles from Sepone along Highway 9. Reconnaissance patrols reached the area earlier this week to scout out the defenses.

Refugee Problems

The war in northern Laos was causing immense refugee problems. Tens of thousands of the population of three million have been displaced by the war that has now engulfed almost the entire nation. Dispatches today from Vientiane said the Communist drive has sent another 15,000 refugees into the hills southwest of Luang Prabang. Already 40,000 to 50,000 were reported homeless in that drive.

The U.S. Command reported officially that seven U.S. helicopters were shot down or damaged in connection with the Laos operation yesterday and today and that the official figures for the week were 17 destroyed — which a spokesman called the highest in seven months.

Yanks Killed

U.S. spokesmen said at least 34 Americans have been killed, 85 wounded and 13 reported missing in connection with the South Vietnamese drive into Laos, now in its 12th day. The total includes 20 dead, 22 wounded and 10 missing in air support operations in Laos. It does not include a number of Americans wounded by Communist shelling in northern South Vietnam.

(Associated Press correspondent William Barton reported that on the border, where Highway 9 enters Laos, a warning sign was missing today. The sign read:

(Warning, No U.S. personnel beyond this point.)

(No one was able to say what happened to the sign.)