

U.S. Aides Expect Strong New Attacks By Enemy in Laos

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 22—

American officials expect further heavy assaults by North Vietnamese forces against the South Vietnamese column that is trying to choke off enemy supply lines in southern Laos.

Some officials said today that Washington had believed that the North Vietnamese units would wait until the South Vietnamese forces were stretched farther out along Route 9, which cuts across the Laotian panhandle, before launching a sizable counterattack.

But after an enemy force drove a South Vietnamese Ranger unit from a Laotian hilltop on the weekend, some American officials said they expected that this was only the start of heavy enemy assaults.

These officials reported that five and possibly six North Vietnamese regiments, each normally 2,000 men at

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full strength, were moving from both north and south toward the South Vietnamese column.

Publicly, the White House sought today to cast the South Vietnamese offensive in the most favorable light despite the serious casualties inflicted on the South Vietnamese Ranger unit over the weekend.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, said that South Vietnamese forces were generally "performing well." He disputed battlefield reports that the flow of Communist supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail network had increased since the South Vietnamese drive into Laos began on Feb. 8.

"There is no question," Mr. Ziegler said, "that the enemy continues to make substantial attempts to force supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex. But I have no information they have doubled their flow of supplies."

Press reports from South Vietnam and Laos have quoted American pilots with access to intelligence briefings as saying that the normal flow of about 1,000 North Vietnamese trucks traveling north or south daily had jumped several times in

the last two weeks to 2,000 a day.

A Pentagon spokesman acknowledged that the weekend retreat by the Rangers had been a setback. But, recalling warnings last week of enemy counterattacks given by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, he asserted that the enemy assaults were "not unexpected."

Although some military officials were known to be disappointed by the slow movement of the 16,000-man South Vietnamese force in the last few days, the Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Freidheim, insisted that the operation could not be considered to have fallen behind schedule.

Administration spokesmen pointedly refused to say that the Laotian road-junction town of Tchepone was a major target of the South Vietnamese offensive, other officials acknowledged privately that it would be extremely difficult to curtail significantly the flow of enemy supplies unless the South Vietnamese forces pushed west of Tchepone.

That town lies about 25 miles west of the South Vietnamese border at a junction of Route 9, running east to west, and several other roads and trails cutting north and south through the mountainous Laotian panhandle. So far the South Vietnamese forward elements have reportedly pushed only about 17 miles into Laos along Route 9, and they are said to be more than five miles from the town.

Officials acknowledged that the enemy units by shifting their supply operations to the west, around Tchepone, were in effect "running around end" of the South Vietnamese column. But, like Mr. Ziegler, the officials disputed the press reports that there had been a step-up in the flow of enemy traffic at this point in the Laotian panhandle.

Under persistent questioning, Mr. Ziegler refused to comment on the weekend battle. In general, he said that President Nixon felt that the operation against the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex was "going well." The White House spokesman gave no specific figures, but he said official reports from the battlefield showed that enemy troops were "taking substantial losses."

Other officials said that the South Vietnamese Ranger bat-

talion forced to evacuate its position Saturday night had, nonetheless, suffered fewer casualties than had the attacking enemy forces. No specific figures were given.

Officials said that the Ranger battalion had been in an exposed position, protecting other South Vietnamese troops looking for caches and supply depots on the feeder trails running off Route 9.

Experienced observers said that in Laos, the North Vietnamese had the advantage of long-range artillery and heavy mortars long placed in position to protect the trail. Moreover, officials acknowledged that the heavy anti-aircraft fire had made air support operations difficult.