

SAIGON SAYS DRIVE BLOCKED INVASION OF FIVE PROVINCES

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Rationale for Laos Incursion
Asserts That It Deterred
Offensive by Enemy

THIEU CITES OBJECTIVE

Heavy Fire by Foe Stalls
South Vietnamese Sweep
for Fifth Day in a Row
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 22—While reports from the battlefield indicated that South Vietnam's push into Laos was stalled for a fifth day, Saigon leaders today introduced a new reason for the drive and, on that ground, pronounced it a success.

President Nguyen Van Thieu, addressing a meeting of teachers and policemen at a training course in the coastal resort of Vungtau, said that before the offensive into Laos deterred them, the North Vietnamese had planned to seize the five northernmost provinces of this country with the goal of improving the Communists' bargaining position at the Paris peace conference.

On Feb. 8 the "clear and unique objective" of the incursion was described by President Thieu, when he announced the offensive in a message to the nation. He said that objective was "disrupting the supply and infiltration network of the Communist North Vietnamese troops."

A Shift in Emphasis

But now, in addition to explaining the attempt to prevent an enemy offensive, Saigon officials citing the goal of destruction of enemy supply depots.

In the north, according to The Associated Press, heavy enemy fire is reported at several points along the Ho Chi Minh network. One South Vietnamese Ranger base under siege since Thursday is reported still holding out while other Ranger units were said to be struggling to hold blocking positions.

The United States Command, meanwhile, announced the loss of two more helicopters, bringing to 26 the number lost since the sweep into Laos began.]

At his briefing on the objectives of the operation today, the Saigon military command spokesman, Lieut. Col. Le Trung Hien, cited the destruction of the foe's depots as the first objective and, almost as an afterthought, added the stop-

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ping of enemy infiltration on the Ho Chi Trail network.

Informed sources say that to destroy significant quantities of materiel, the South Vietnamese would have to penetrate much deeper because the more important supply depots and truck parks are closer to the central trails of the network.

The quantities of arms, other materiel and foods said to have been captured so far are negligible compared with those seized during last year's allied incursion into the Cambodian border areas.

But on the issue of the projected depth of the advance, caution is now being observed. At the outset, the road-junction town of Tchepone, a major truck base and supply depot on the trail, was termed by many officials the first major objective, although presumably for military security reasons this was never officially stated.

Drive Termed Uncertain

But although South Vietnamese troops were reported to have advanced within a few miles of the devastated town, ranking South Vietnamese and American officers in the field and here now say that they are uncertain whether a drive on Tchepone is planned.

Colonel Hien declined to comment on whether the operation—in which 16,000 South Vietnamese troops backed by 9,000 Americans are participating—was in fact reducing enemy infiltration into South Vietnam but those in the best positions to know, reliable United States Air Force sources and fighter pilots who fly regularly over the trail, say that more rather than fewer enemy trucks have been moving along the trail since the offensive began.

Air Force intelligence officers report that the western reaches of the trail, those farthest from the Vietnamese border, are carrying a considerably greater amount of traffic. This would indicate that to reduce infiltration and supply movement significantly, the offensive would have to be carried more deeply into Laos.

But after several days of saying that the advance was halted by bad flying weather and heavy North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire, Colonel Hien declined to say whether there would be any further advance. Flying weather has been good for several days, and yesterday United States planes and helicopters flew more missions than ever before in the campaign.

Reverses Acknowledged

At the same time, Saigon is beginning to acknowledge some of the reverses suffered by its forces in Laos. While still reporting minimal casualty figures—168 dead, 661 wounded—and refraining from openly conceding that some positions on the northern flank of the advance have been overrun.

Colonel Hien said that the 39th Ranger Battalion "does not have any more combat capability."

The elite unit of about 450 men was overrun Saturday and high military sources said that about 300 men were "eliminated."

The jubilant tone in which the Saigon press at first spoke of the Laotian campaign has given way to subdued reporting. Among the educated classes here, including Government officials and military officers, worry over the venture is openly expressed.

And a simple, elderly Saigonese, asked how the fighting was going, looked up from his newspaper and said in French, "Badly."