

SAIGON SAYS ARMY WILL NOT NOW GO DEEPER INTO LAOS

Penetration Is Put at About
16 Miles, a Reduction in
Reports on Incursion

SUPPLY PROBLEM CITED

U.S. Tells of Weekend Raids
by 50 Planes on Missile
Sites in North Vietnam

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 23—The South Vietnamese military command said today that its forces had no intention "right now" of penetrating more deeply into Laos.

The command's spokesman, who made this statement in response to a question, said that the sweep by about 16,000 South Vietnamese troops had cut across the Ho Chi Minh Trail system of enemy supply lines to a depth of about 16 miles.

This was another change in the depth of penetration officially reported. Yesterday South Vietnamese forward elements were said to be 17½ miles inside Laos. At the end of last week a spokesman put them 22 miles from the border of northwestern South Vietnam.

Drive Began Feb. 8

The South Vietnamese troops were first said to have reached the 16-mile point in the initial week of their advance, which is heavily supported by United States air power. The operation began Feb. 8.

[The commander of the South Vietnamese force said that enemy troops had cut the road behind his forward armored units and that his "most serious problem" was one of supplying his troops, United Press International reported. Earlier, the colonel commanding the spearhead unit said in an American Broadcasting Company television interview that, if the drive continued to be stalled, his tank force should try to get out before all escape routes were cut.]

The United States command also disclosed that 50 American fighter-bombers flew "protective reaction strikes" against missile and antiaircraft artillery positions in North Vietnam last weekend.

The command spokesman said that no planes had been lost and that news of the raids had been withheld until now "mostly for security reasons."

'Repeated Hostile Acts'

The raids were ordered, he said, "after repeated hostile acts and recent SAM [Soviet-built surface-to-air missile] firings by antiaircraft positions against United States craft involved in interdiction of North Vietnamese supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos."

The spokesman said that an hour-long attack was made on Saturday by 20 "strike aircraft" and another hour-long raid on Sunday by 30. He declined to say what results had been achieved. As for the targets,

Continued on Page 16, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 1

he said only that they were below the 19th Parallel, which is about 120 miles south of Hanoi.

The two raids went beyond three attacks on Feb. 14, 15 and 16 that were announced previously. In those attacks, single planes or at most two missions against the Communist supply trail system in Laos attacked antiaircraft positions on the North Vietnamese side of the border when their instruments told them that radar-controlled guns on the ground were tracking them preparatory to firing. The raids last weekend had the sole objective of striking positions in North Vietnam.

On the Laotian front, pressure continued to be concentrated on the northern flank of the South Vietnamese sweep, whose east-west axis is Route 9. This flank is guarded by Ranger battalions, which have borne the brunt of the North Vietnamese artillery and ground onslaught. [According to informed sources quoted by The Associated Press, the drive has been stalled both by heavy enemy resistance and by heavy mining of the region. The drive has been stalled almost a week.]

No Copters Reported Lost

Although United States helicopters flew nearly 1,200 missions in support of the Laotian operation, for the first time in several days no American helicopter was reported lost. One South Vietnamese helicopter was reported to have been shot down 12 miles northwest of Laobao, a village south of Route 9, and one passenger was reported to have been killed.

According to United States

Air Force sources, the South Vietnamese sweep has choked off North Vietnamese troop and supply movements only on the eastern fringe of the trail network in Laos and, instead of diminishing the total flow of traffic, has forced it westward.

If the drive is halted at the present point of penetration, it would fall far short of the objective President Nguyen Van Thieu announced on Feb. 8. That was to disrupt the North Vietnamese supply and infiltration network.

Supply Problem Stressed

KHESANH, South Vietnam, Feb. 23 (UPI) — Lieut. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the South Vietnamese forces in Laos, said today the "most serious problem" he had was supplying his units.

He said in an interview that the North Vietnamese had cut Route 9 behind some of his forward armored units, which he reported to be 15 to 18 miles inside Laos.

The greatest accomplishment of his troops to date, he said, is the severing of a North Vietnamese fuel pipeline along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

He reported that his troops had destroyed four miles of a four-inch line, which ran from North Vietnam to a point near the Cambodian border. In doing so, he added, the South Vietnamese also destroyed nearly 200,000 gallons of gasoline.

The South Vietnamese colonel leading the spearhead of the drive in Laos has said in a television interview that his armored force should try to get out "if we cannot move."

As the South Vietnamese operation continued to be bogged down, Lieut. Col. Bui The Dung was interviewed by

the American Broadcasting Company at the advance post of Task Force II, about 16 miles inside Laos.

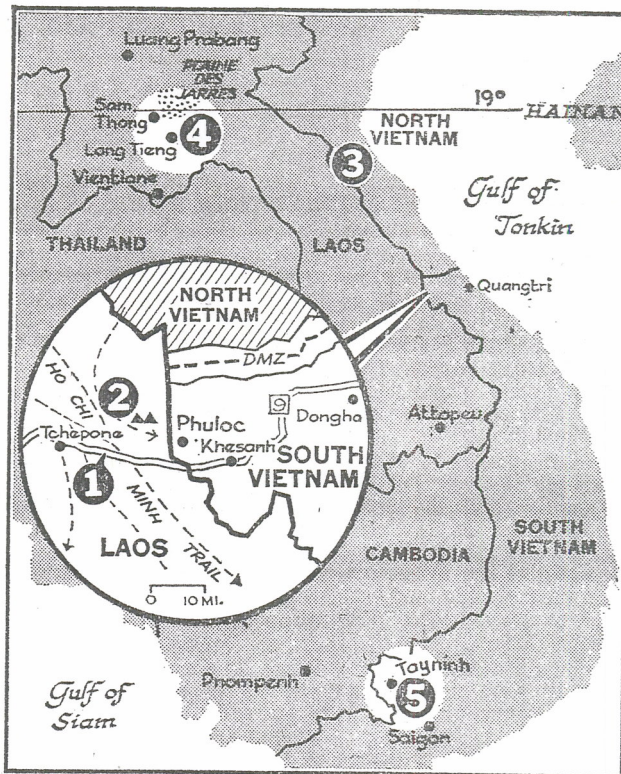
Asked if his force should try to pull out before the North Vietnamese cut all escape routes behind him, the colonel replied:

"If we cannot move, we have to stop and search carefully as fast as possible all areas that we have crossed and then stop the operation."

Asked if this meant to try to get out, he said:

"Try to get out, yes. There's no reason to stay in bad country when you cannot move."

In the interview, which was broadcast by A.B.C. on Monday night, the Colonel also said, in response to a question, that he could not understand why tanks were chosen to spearhead the drive through the mountainous jungle.



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THE WAR IN INDOCHINA: The sweep in Laos will not penetrate beyond 16 miles (1) for now, Saigon spokesman said. A hill on northern flank (2) was still reported held following enemy capture of one beside it. U.S. missile sites in North Vietnam somewhere south of 19th Parallel (3). In northern Laos, a hilltop near Long Tieng (4) was reported recaptured. In Tay Ninh area of South Vietnam (5), U.S. artillery base was assaulted.