

U.S. AIDES PORTRAY A SUCCESS IN LAOS

But Some Concede Drive
Must Penetrate Farther
to Curtail Supplies

FEB 24 1971

By HEDRICK SMITH

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 23 —

The Administration stepped up efforts today to portray the allied drive in Laos as a success though some officials privately acknowledged that South Vietnamese forces would have to move much farther across Laos to curtail the flow of enemy supplies significantly.

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird told reporters that the operation was "proceeding on schedule" and that its objective of disrupting and choking off enemy supply lines was "being achieved." But he forecast "tougher, difficult fighting" ahead for South Vietnamese forces in both Laos and Cambodia.

With the Nixon Administration under rising political pressure because of its Indochina policies, Republican Senators quoted Henry A. Kissinger, the President's adviser on national security, as saying the several

Continued on Page 18, Column 4

Continued From Page 1, Col. 2

key enemy supply routes had been cut.

After a White House briefing from Mr. Kissinger, Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania told reporters: "What has been accomplished is that of four principal highways, three have been cut, one of them quite recently. Of two pipelines, both have been cut and burned.

Representative Gerald R. Ford of Michigan, the minority leader, said the pipelines apparently ran from the North Vietnamese coast through Laos to supply gasoline and fuel oil for trucks and military equipment.

Mr. Ford not only praised the Laotian operation but also declared that the South Vietnamese offensive in Cambodia — where Mr. Laird has forecast heavy fighting — was "fantastically successful."

The Republican optimism was not shared by Senate Democrats, who voted a caucus resolution asking total withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam during the 1971-72 session of Congress.

Common Cause, the citizen's lobby headed by John Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in the Johnson Administration, called on Congress to legislate a fixed timetable for American withdrawal to stop the Nixon Administration from "playing Russian roulette" in Southeast Asia.

Senator Scott took sharp issue with press reports that the allied operation had bogged down, but he declined to say that the southward flow of Communist supplies had been reduced.

"I would not want to give you the impression that this means that three-fourths of the supplies have been cut off," Mr. Scott said. But he declared: "There is no evidence that the operation is stalled at all. The evidence is that objectives are being achieved and that the enemy is resisting with strong flanking movements and these flanking movements are being countered."

White House officials ac-

knowledged that just before the operation and during its first week, when Saigon's forces were just edging into Laos, enemy forces had sharply stepped up the flow of supplies through southern Laos. But by now, they said, that unusually heavy flow had "almost certainly been reduced" by the operation.

Basing his reports on the Kissinger briefing, the minority leader identified the three blocked roads as Route 9, the east-west road being used by South Vietnamese forces, and Routes 92 and 914, running roughly north and south across it.

The fourth, he said, was route 23, farther west. Other Republican leaders described Route 23 as still open to traffic but more vulnerable to air attack than the other roads, which are covered by dense foliage at various points.

White House officials described these as three of the truck routes normally used by the enemy as major lines of supply.

"But that doesn't mean there aren't 15 other roads they can use for bicycles," one official added. He described other roads as marginally usable by enemy trucks.

United States Army Map Service maps, publicly available for several years, show several other roads crossing Route 9, including Routes 234, 920, 911 and 913. Government analysts cautioned that there was a network of unmarked trails and dirt roads that would allow enemy forces to reroute their traffic farther west periodically as the allies advanced. "These aren't beltways," said one official, emphasizing the complexity of the allied task.

According to one high-level estimate, it would be virtually impossible for Saigon's troops to block enemy supply movements without pushing 40 miles into Laos, which is about 110 miles wide at this point. Forward elements of the South Vietnamese column have been reported roughly 17 miles into Laos in the last few days.

The intensified American air raids against North Vietnamese mountain passes leading into Laos much farther to the north were seen as another blow against the enemy supply complex.

High Administration officials insisted that supply depots and truck parts had not been the principal targets of the weekend raids around the Mugia Pass leading into Laos. But they said that some such targets could have been hit, if near enemy anti-aircraft missile sites.

Previously the Administration described large bombing raids last May and November as "protective reaction" against enemy missile sites, but officials have privately acknowledged that supply concentrations of supplies were major "corollary" targets.

On the ground in Laos, enemy forces said number in the thousands were described as converging on the South Vietnamese column, evidently trying to pick off units on isolated hilltops overlooking the main column.

Both in this region and in the area of the Chup rubber plantation in Cambodia, where Saigon's troops began a drive three weeks ago, Mr. Laird said he looked "for tough, difficult fighting" in the days ahead.

Plantation Battle Expected

Other officials said that 10,000 enemy troops were massed around the Chup plantation, 75 miles northwest of Saigon. South Vietnamese forces reportedly drove the enemy out of their base area in this region over the last few weeks.

Officials said the enemy forces pulled out but stopped three or four miles from the plantation and began probing actions against the South Vietnamese. This was seen by American analysts as indicating a counterattack.

The American role in the Laos offensive came under sharp criticism today from Mr. Gardner, the chairman of Common Cause.

"Each military action he

takes in Indochina runs the totally unacceptable risk of a wider war," Mr. Gardner said in a press statement. "We must tell him to stop this deadly game."

Just as in the past, he contended, the temptation has been to escalate the war to gain military advantage. The Administration's rationale has been

that this would speed American withdrawals, but, Mr. Gardner said, "The President has not only not set a date for complete termination of our involvement, he has never said flatly and explicitly that he ever intends that all American military forces be withdrawn from Vietnam."