

# Laird Says Laos Drive Adheres to Plan

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 24—The Secretary of Defense and a senior military aide insisted today that South Vietnamese forces had deliberately paused in the offensive in Laos rather than being bogged down as a result of enemy attacks.

"The operation is going according to plan," Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird declared at a Pentagon briefing.

He was supported by Lieut. Gen. John W. Vogt Jr., director of the Joint Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said:

"The enemy has not stopped the movement along High 9. There are no major engagements in the area stopping our forces."

The officials said no one could have been sure in advance whether the North Vietnamese would fight and, if so, where. Now that there have been substantial enemy reinforcements and some hard fighting, they said, a "decision to pause" was made to "assess the enemy reactions" and "observe where he did intend to attack."

While the Cabinet official and the general warned once again that there would be "tough battles" ahead in Laos, as well as in the simultaneous South Vietnamese campaign in Cambodia, they were generally optimistic about accomplishments to date in both places.

## Quick Withdrawal Possible

Yet Mr. Laird left the door open for a quick withdrawal from Laos ahead of the rainy season in May, should North Vietnam mount an overwhelming response to the incursion, which began Feb. 8.

In answer to a question, the Secretary said: "The commitments of further forces in this area to meet a massive force from the North would be a judgment factor that the Joint General Staff of the South Vietnamese would have to face up to at that time."

But the tone of the 80-minute news conference was guardedly optimistic rather than pessimistic, apparently aimed at countering rising concern that the Laos operation had stalled and was in danger of collapse.

General Vogt said the 10,200 South Vietnamese troops in Laos had already accomplished "the first portion" of their objectives.

Washington sources have put the number of South Vietnamese in Laos at 12,000, whereas news reports from the battle zone have given figures as high as 16,000. Officials here agree that about 20,000 are in position to take part.

Defining the objectives attained, General Vogt said they included the severing of Route

## He and a General Insist Saigon's Forces Are Not Bogged Down

92, which he described as the main north-south road, in the Ho Chi Minh complex of roads and trails, destruction of sections of a four-inch petroleum pipeline from North Vietnam and the block of the intersection of Routes 914, 99 and 92, which he said the North Vietnamese had tried to use to bypass the current offensive.

Both Mr. Laird and General Vogt tried to downgrade the importance of the town of Tchepone, about eight miles west along Route 9 from the last reported South Vietnamese position. More important, they said, were roads and weapons caches in the area.

In the early days of the offensive, when the enemy seemed to be fading in front of the advancing South Vietnamese, some planners expressed the hope that they might be able to move all the way to the intersection of Routes 9 and 23, roughly 20 miles west of Tchepone.

## Shift to West Denied

General Vogt denied published reports that North Vietnam had increased the flow of supplies during the offensive by shifting west to Route 23 or Route 13. Both north-south roads lack much overhead cover, he said, and would subject North Vietnamese trucks to

heavy losses to air strikes.

He conceded that the South Vietnamese 23d Ranger Battalion had taken heavy losses, with more than 100 killed, in being driven from a mountain-top northeast of Tchepone. The enemy lost two battalions and had two others "severely mauled," he added, losing about three times as many men as the South Vietnamese.

Mr. Laird said supplies of weapons and ammunition moving from North Vietnam had been "substantially disrupted by the attacks." He declined to estimate what portion had been blocked but said the flow had been reduced.

"The initiative no longer belongs to the enemy in Indochina," the defense secretary said. "That is one reason I continue to hope for a breakthrough in the talks in Paris."

## Copter Losses Discussed

Since the start of the offensive, General Vogt said, North Vietnam has reinforced the 15,000 combat troops and 10,000 logistics troops in the area with six regiments, some from North Vietnam. Another source estimated the new force at 6,000 men.

Discussing the losses of American helicopters supporting the invasion, General Vogt said that through Feb. 23 about 20 helicopters were shot down during 40,000 missions. In a similar period last year, he said, 24 were lost in operations throughout South Vietnam.

## U.S. to Let Press Ride Its Helicopters Into Laos

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24 (UPI) — Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird today reversed a policy against allowing United States newsmen to ride American support helicopters in their attempts to cover the South Vietnamese offensive in Laos.

This ended a major irritant among correspondents whose only means of observing the fighting since the operation began Feb. 8 has been to ride on the few South Vietnamese helicopters being used.

Mr. Laird's decision apparently resulted from intervention by Representative John E. Moss of California, chairman of a House subcommittee on freedom of information. Mr. Moss had protested the previous policy in talks with Pentagon and State Department officials as an unnecessary obstacle to war coverage and a threat to the safety of newsmen.