

END OF LAOS DRIVE HINTED IN SAIGON; 2,000 WITHDRAWN

Foe's Supply Line Termed
Sufficiently Disrupted—
New Raid Plans Cited

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Saturday, March 20—The South Vietnamese command announced yesterday that it had withdrawn 2,000 to 3,000 of its troops from action in Laos in 48 hours.

The withdrawals, which had begun Thursday with the evacuation of 1,000 to 1,500 troops, reportedly left 18,000 South Vietnamese troops in Laos. But indications were growing that the South Vietnamese were preparing to end major operations against the North Vietnamese supply-trail network, which they say has been sufficiently disrupted.

Spokesmen cautioned, however, against speculation on an early completion of the sweep, saying that "there are still some secret operations planned."

Original plans had called for ending the drive in Laos before the onset of the rainy season early in May, but hints of an earlier withdrawal have been increasing as enemy attacks have grown in intensity. Once out of Laos, South Vietnamese troops plan to stay on at Khesanh, in northwestern South Vietnam, from where small raids into Laos could be mounted from time to time, United States sources here have said.

In announcing the withdrawals yesterday, the Saigon command reported that 3,000 marines were close to the Laotian border in northwestern South Vietnam, "ready to move in on short notice."

Action on the Laotian battlefields was described as relatively light compared with the recent heavy fighting that led to the abandonment of Fire Base Lolo, about 21 miles from the border. Spokesmen said forward units were now operating about 16 miles inside Laos.

Enemy Pressure Continues

Enemy pressure was reported continuing in that area around the base called Landing Zone Brown. Spokesmen confirmed reports that there no longer were any South Vietnamese troops at Brown, but insisted that units were still operating in the vicinity.

The United States command announced that four more American helicopters were lost over Laos Thursday, two shot down and two destroyed on the ground. One American was wounded and two reported missing. The total number of American helicopters reported lost while supporting the South Vietnamese operation is now 73. Many others have been shot down, but have not been listed officially because they were salvaged.

Attacks in South Vietnam on American units and bases supporting the operation wounded 19 Americans, the command said. For the fifth consecutive day, the sprawling allied base at Khesanh came under rocket attack, and American helicopters scattered into the sky.

The South Vietnamese forces

Continued on Page 6, Column 4

Continued From Page 1, Col. 5

that have been withdrawn included the First Infantry's First Regiment, which was badly mauled and forced to retreat in one of the most costly battles of the five-week-old campaign in Laos. These troops were lifted out of the area around Lolo Thursday by American helicopter pilots.

Troops Along Route 9

Apart from the South Vietnamese operations south of Route 9, the key road across the border into Laos, Saigon troops are posted along the highway and just north of it.

Their area of operations has been shrinking for the last two weeks since units pulled out of

Tchepone, the strategic road junction area about 25 miles by air from the border.

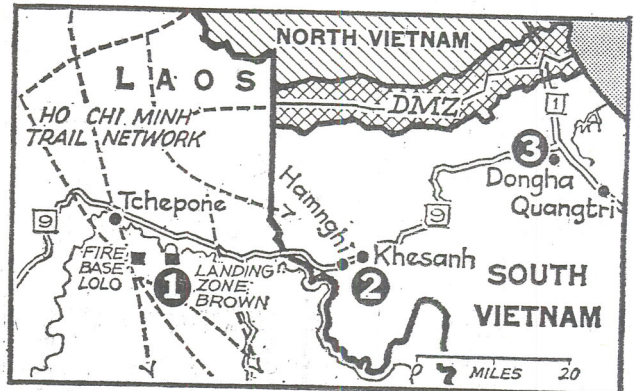
The scene yesterday at Hamngi, the South Vietnamese forward command post near the Laotian border, added to the growing belief that the Laotian operation may be in its final nameless operations. South of least 50 trucks were seen being loaded with troops and equipment, all destined for Dongha, an operational base near the South Vietnamese coast.

At Khesanh, the Black Panther company of Saigon's First Infantry Division was also leaving by helicopters for rear bases.

Units Called 'Superfluous'

Brig. Gen. Phan Van Phu, the First Division commander, told reporters at Hamngi that the troops leaving were only those regarded as "superfluous." Other spokesmen said the Black Panther company, which helps American teams recover lost helicopters in Laos, was no longer needed at the border.

"We won't comment on our



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Action was reported continuing in area of Landing Zone Brown (1). Khesanh (2) was shelled again. Saigon units withdrawn from Laos moved east to base at Dongha (3).

future operations," said General Phu. "It's like playing poker. We don't say what we have in our hand. That way nobody will take all our money."

Describing North Vietnamese strategy in recent days, General Phu said the enemy had been using "hugging" tactics, getting close to the South Vietnamese units in the hope that air strikes would not be called in. The general said. "We have learned to call in strikes very close to our own positions."

He reported that some strikes by B-52 bombers, normally used for strategic attacks on roads and supply depots, were ordered within 300 yards of South Vietnamese troops in an effort to stave off enemy assaults. He acknowledged that some South Vietnamese troops had been killed by mistake because of the close air strikes.

Some Grab at Helicopters

Reporting on the heavy fighting around Lolo, the general confirmed that in their hurry to leave, some South Vietna-

mese soldiers grabbed onto the skids of the American helicopters. But he said only a few soldiers were involved. He said many wounded soldiers sought desperately to get on the helicopters.

Because the American helicopters had difficulty reaching the beleaguered South Vietnamese troops during the four days of fighting, the general said, the South Vietnamese had to bury their dead in Laos. He agreed that morale had been hurt because "so many wounded were laying around waiting to be picked up."

"We cannot conclude that the morale of all our soldiers is low," the general said. "This kind of thing happens in every army."

Like other South Vietnamese spokesmen, General Phu pointed to the heavy casualties suffered by the North Vietnamese troops in the battle, Saigon says that nearly 1700 enemy soldiers were killed in the fighting around Lolo. It said 110 South Vietnamese were killed and 270 were wounded.