

U.S. AGAIN STRIKES AT MISSILE BASES IN NORTH VIETNAM

Bombing Called Retaliation
for Attacks on American
Aircraft Over Laos

RETREAT IS CONTINUING

Saigon Says It Has Pulled
Out 10,000 Men Despite
Heavy Enemy Assaults

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By ALVIN SHUSTER

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Tuesday, March 23 — United States fighters and bombers struck at missile sites inside North Vietnam yesterday for the second consecutive day as South Vietnamese troops retreating from Laos continued to encounter heavy enemy assaults.

The raids, directed at targets up to 140 miles south of Hanoi, were said to be in retaliation for attacks by missiles and other anti-aircraft weapons against American reconnaissance planes and bombers flying over Laos. None of the bombers was damaged by the missiles, the United States command said.

A South Vietnamese spokesman said that 10,000 men had now been pulled out of Laos, leaving about 12,000 still there. But other sources here said fewer than 8,000 were still engaged in the drive that began Feb. 8 against enemy supply lines. The units farthest west were said to be only about six miles from the border of northwestern South Vietnam.

For part of the day, bad weather coupled with intense anti-aircraft fire inhibited American helicopters flying into Laos to rescue the hard-pressed Vietnamese troops.

Other Strikes Discussed

Military sources said that all South Vietnamese troops should be out of Laos within a week. They added that decisions were now pending on future operations, hinting at possible quick strikes into Laos from points farther south or a drive into the Ashau Valley in South Vietnam, long an enemy haven and threat to the country's northern provinces.

Route 9, the old French colonial road that cuts across northern South Vietnam and the Laotian panhandle, was becoming a nightmare yesterday for the South Vietnamese armor trying to push to the border. Carrying airborne units, the tanks and armored carriers ran into repeated ambushes and were reported being pursued by enemy tanks.

At least two South Vietnamese tanks were reported destroyed in the attacks. American planes were said to have destroyed several of the pursuing enemy tanks.

Enemy gunners also attacked Khesanh, the vast air and logistical base in South Vietnam, reportedly killing one American and wounding several. It was the first reported death of an American there since the mortar and rocket attacks began last week.

Concern mounted among

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American officers today that the North Vietnamese would push close enough to the border in pursuit of Saigon's forces to threaten United States installations on the other side. Apart from the shelling of Khesanh, the American troops were being harassed by enemy infiltrators trying to cut Route 9 where it crosses back into South Vietnam.

Some 350 American soldiers with tanks and armored personnel carriers are trying to clear a part of Route 9 that begins near the border point of Langvei. The Americans have suffered some casualties in recent days.

"We run down the road, through an ambush, turn around and run back through the ambush," said an American soldier on an armored personnel carrier. "That's what they call opening the road."

South Vietnamese spokesmen said that only two or three fire bases remained active in Laos and that their entire First Infantry Division had returned.

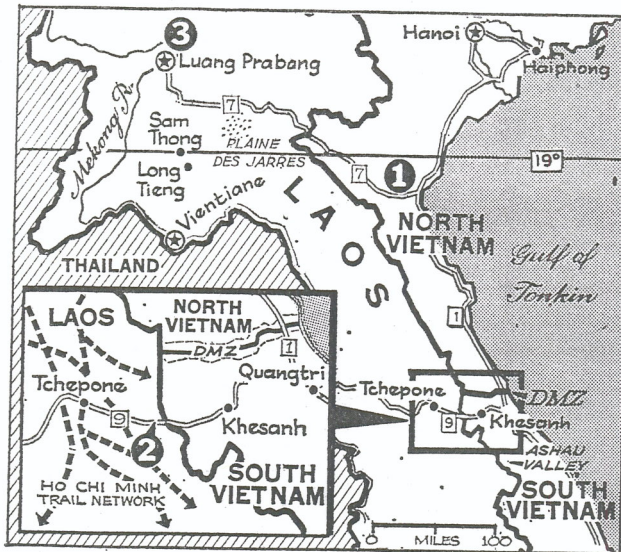
At the official briefing, the spokesman berated newsmen for calling the withdrawal of South Vietnamese troops a "retreat," but then he inadvertently used the word himself. He insisted that "with or without enemy pressure we would have moved as planned" and that if enemy attacks were heavy "we could not have withdrawn like we did."

Skepticism Voiced

Many diplomats and other observers in Saigon, however, believe that the operation was ending earlier than planned. If enemy pressure had been lighter, they argue, the South Vietnamese undoubtedly would have remained until the start of the rainy season in May, which makes travel on the Ho Chi Minh trail network difficult.

American and South Vietnamese spokesmen insist that they are satisfied with the damage to enemy supply lines and storage depots. They also point to the loss of 12,000 enemy soldiers reported killed in the allied thrust as a sign of success. South Vietnamese losses out at more than 1,000 dead, nearly 4,000 wounded, and about 200 missing.

A South Vietnamese marine battalion on the southern flank of the operation, meanwhile, reportedly was attacked again



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U.S. planes bombed North Vietnam up to 19th Parallel (1). Westernmost Saigon units in Laos were six miles from border (2). Foe attacked near Luang Prabang. (3).

yesterday morning. The marines, who are charged with covering the withdrawal, suffered 85 killed and 38 wounded, a spokesman said. He estimated that some 600 enemy soldiers were killed, mostly by American air strikes. American pilots said they had been unable to reach the site, four miles from the border, to pick up the dead and wounded because of the intense anti-aircraft fire.

2 U. S. Helicopters Lost

Enemy gunners reportedly shot down two more American helicopters Sunday, killing two crewmen. Another helicopter, missing since March 5, was also found destroyed, bringing the total reported lost in support of the South Vietnamese operation to 85 helicopters.

The command said that a total of 61 crewmen had been killed, 71 wounded, and 24 were missing in the crashes on both sides of the border. Many other helicopters shot down and then lifted back into South Vietnam for repair are not included by the the command in the figures on losses.

In announcing the air strikes yesterday, the command provide no details on the numbers or types of planes involved, but the strikes Sunday and yesterday were believed the largest since 250 fighters and bombers attacked installations in North Vietnam Nov. 21.

The command said the attacks were of "limited duration" in line with "our repeat-

edly stated policy and determined effort to protect American lives."