

# SAIGON DRIVE IN LAOS ENDS AS 2,000 LEAVE LAST BASE; ENEMY KEEPS UP PRESSURE

## Thieu Said to Have Curbed Offensive to Reduce Loss

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By WILLIAM BEECHER  
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WASHINGTON, March 24—Well-placed Pentagon sources say that President Nguyen Van Thieu decided to curtail South Vietnam's offensive in Laos despite suggestions some senior American military men that he send in replacements and try to stay on for a few more weeks.

With unseasonably bad weather both in southern Laos and at the key American support base at Khesanh, they reported, President Thieu decided against running the risk of seeing some of his units trapped and battered with insufficient air support.

The informants say Mr. Thieu felt that his forces, in more than six weeks of bitter fighting, had already accomplished a good deal.

Senior Defense Department

planners hinted, however, that before the onset of monsoon rains in early May, commando-style raids might be staged by small South Vietnamese units up and down the extensive Ho Chi Minh Trail network in southern Laos.

If President Thieu approves such operations, the planners said, raiding parties of 500 to 1,000 men might swoop down in helicopters, attack ammunition caches, truck parks and communications facilities, plant mines and booby traps and then depart before large North Vietnamese reaction forces could reach the site.

There are scores of such targets along the trail network, the sources said. To try to de-

Continued on Page 8, Column 1

### Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

Send them all effectively would require a substantial increase in North Vietnamese troops.

At a news briefing this morning, Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, said he could not "absolutely preclude" new South Vietnamese raids into Laos in the near future. He said he knew of no imminent plans for such forays.

### Testimony by Laird

After closed-door testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee today, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird conceded that the South Vietnamese campaign in Laos had been cut short because of the "tremendously vicious and violent reaction on the part of the North Vietnamese and also the fact that the South Vietnamese feel that they have carried out a primary objective of the operation — that is, to disrupt the logistics supply routes."

Both Mr. Laird and Mr. Friedheim stressed to reporters that when the Secretary was briefed by the South Vietnamese in January, the Laos campaign was described in terms of a five-to-eight-week operation.

Mr. Friedheim went so far as to note that if the South Vietnamese had wanted to stay longer than eight weeks, they would have had to ask the United States to extend air support.

But privately officials said that some American military leaders wanted the South Vietnamese to remain longer so that they could sweep well south of Route 9, blocking enemy supply movements and destroying caches as they re-entered South Vietnam along Route 926 or Route 922, well to the south of Route 9.

"But we weren't running it," one official, commented "so we couldn't order it."

### Some Accomplishment Seen

Privately, a number of Administration planners, military and civilian, are in general agreement that the operation accomplished some of its objectives but fell short of expectations.

Analysts assent that North Vietnam had hoped to double or triple its supply shipments during the October-through-May dry season, but to date has moved only about 3,000 tons of ammunition, weapons and food south of Route 9.

This, they say, represents only about 20 per cent of the flow up to this time one year ago.

However, the North Vietnamese are said to be hastily restoring destroyed facilities, and have more than a month of dry weather remaining to try to rush in more supplies before heavy rains turn the trails into quagmires.