

AMERICANS BEGIN TROOP PULLBACK NEAR LAOS BORDER

Concern Growing That Foe
Will Intensify Attacks on
Installations of U.S.

ALLIES LEAVE LANGVEI

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Washington Warns It May
Order Air Raids if Hanoi
Fires From the DMZ

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Friday, March 26—American units began pulling away from the Laotian border today as concern continued that North Vietnamese troops would try to intensify their attacks against American installations that supported the South Vietnamese campaign against enemy supply lines in Laos.

At the big allied base on the Khesanh plateau, American soldiers began dismantling equipment in the headquarters area of United States 101st Airborne Division, which had been providing much of the helicopter support for the Vietnamese.

South Vietnamese troops, meanwhile, abandoned their westernmost position at Langvei, four miles from the Laotian border at noon today. The last few hundred Vietnamese marines who had been covering the rear of the retreat from Laos also returned to their bases last night.

[In Washington, the Defense Department issued a veiled warning that air strikes on North Vietnamese artillery and rocket sites might have to be ordered if

there was firing from new positions within the demilitarized zone, which straddles the border between the two Vietnams. Several battalions of long-range artillery and rockets have been reported dug in at several points in the zone.]

The last Vietnamese unit inside Laos—the Eighth Marine Battalion—had been on a hilltop a few miles west of the border. B-52 strikes were called in on the hilltop today.

From the mountain and its

Continued on Page 10, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

sheer cliffs overlooking the Khesanh plateau in 1968, North Vietnamese gunners pounded the Khesanh base incessantly for four months in a siege against United States marines.

A Saigon spokesman said today that South Vietnam casualties in the operation were 1,146 killed, 4,236 wounded and 246 missing in action. This would represent about 25 per cent of the total South Vietnamese force. Some observers here say the official figures are on the low side. Some reports suggest that the South Vietnamese may have suffered casualties of 40 per cent or more.

The spokesman said that 13,688 enemy soldiers were killed.

The United States command reported that eight American soldiers were killed and seven wounded in clashes yesterday with enemy infiltrators near the American support bases. In one action, a unit of the 101st Airborne Division was attacked by troops using automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades that killed three and wounded six Americans and destroyed an armored personnel carrier.

A reflection of the enemy activity around the American installations came in the announcement today that five United States helicopters were shot down over South Vietnamese territory near Khesanh yesterday while supporting the hasty retreat of the rest of the South Vietnamese forces.

This brought to 94 the number of helicopters lost in the six-and-one-half week Laotian operation. Many more have been shot down, but are not included in the official count because they were recovered.

In the opinion of military officers here, there is a clear threat to the estimated 16,000 American troops in South Vietnam's northernmost province, from which the allied thrust into Laos began on Feb. 8.

The American operation in support of the South Vietnamese drive into Laos started with 9,000 men in direct support of Saigon's forces, but reinforcements, including more helicopters and their crews, arrived later.

There was no word today, however, of any further enemy

tank activity although the command reported yesterday that 24 PT-76 Soviet-made tanks were spotted one mile southwest of the border. The command said eight tanks were destroyed by American bombers and helicopter gunships.

The other significant fighting occurred six miles north of Khesanh, where five American soldiers were killed and one wounded.

United States warplanes, meanwhile, continued to pound the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex, on which the North Vietnamese were attempting to resume their supply efforts.

Within the last two days United States planes reportedly hit a surface-to-air missile site situated on the border of North Vietnam and Laos. No details were available.

Last Sunday and Monday, United States planes swept over North Vietnam hitting SAM sites, other anti-aircraft weapons and related supply depots in what appeared to be part of a strategy designed to protect not only the American warplanes bombing the trail network but also the American troops which supported the South Vietnamese campaign.

Vietnamese troops abandoned their westernmost positions at Langvei, four miles from the Laotian border. The last Vietnamese unit inside Laos—the Eighth Marine Battalion, which had been on a hilltop a few miles west of the border—pulled out at 6 P.M. Wednesday night, a Saigon spokesman announced.

The unannounced air strikes Wednesday and yesterday followed those disclosed on Sunday and Monday when an estimated 200 planes struck targets below the 19th Parallel, about 120 miles north of the Demilitarized Zone straddling the border between North and South Vietnam.

'Protective Reaction'

The command said that the raids on Sunday and Monday, which coincided with the retreat of South Vietnamese troops from Laos, destroyed at least three SAM missile sites. Sources said later that other targets included supply depots and possible troop concentrations.

Five SAM's were launched against the fighters and bombers and one Air Force F-4 was

shot down, the first aircraft lost to the missiles in three years. The two-man crew was rescued.

The extent of the latest raids, which reportedly destroyed at least one SAM site, was not disclosed. The command has described all such strikes as "protective reaction" raids in response to anti-aircraft attacks against reconnaissance planes and American aircraft bombing the supply lines in Laos.

In protest against the strikes, the North Vietnamese delegation at the Paris peace talks canceled yesterday's session. Hanoi's chief negotiator, Xuan Thuy, referred to undisclosed air attacks against his country in a speech in Paris Wednesday night.

An increase in the "protective reaction" strikes against North Vietnam was foreshadowed in President Nixon's recent remarks that he would order such attacks on supply and infiltration routes and military complexes "if I determine that such activities by North Vietnam endanger our remaining forces in South Vietnam, particularly as we are withdrawing."

In the view of military sources, there is now a clear and present danger to the estimated 16,000 American troops in South Vietnam's northernmost province, from which the allied thrust into Laos began on Feb. 8. The Americans started with 9,000 men in direct support of the South Vietnamese, but reinforcements, including more helicopter crews, arrived later.

There was no word of any further enemy tank activity, although the command reported Wednesday that 24 PT-76 tanks had been seen one mile southwest of the border.

A reflection of the enemy activity around the American installations came in the announcement that five United States helicopters were shot down over South Vietnamese territory near Khesanh Wednesday while supporting Saigon's forces. This brought to 94 the number of helicopters lost in the six-and-a-half week Laotian operation. Many more had been shot down but were not included in the official

count because they were recovered.

In the announced crashes, 66 Americans have been killed and 79 wounded and 28 are listed as missing. The weekly casualty figures released yesterday included some of the helicopter deaths, showing that in the week ending last Saturday 54 Americans were killed in action, an increase of 10 over the previous week. The number of Americans wounded in action rose by 179 over the week to 335.

As South Vietnamese troops continued to move to rear bases to recover from the campaign in Laos, military sources reported that American soldiers would also begin moving from the border in increasing numbers. Military sources said, for example, that the aluminum planking on one of the two 3,900-foot runways at Khesanh would soon be removed to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

B-52 strikes were called in on the hilltop occupied until late Wednesday by South Vietnamese marines, military sources reported. From the mountain and its sheer cliff faces overlooking the Khesanh plateau, North Vietnamese gunners pounded the Khesanh base incessantly for four months in 1968 before the United States Marines withdrew.

Foe Lists Raid Casualties

HANOI, March 25 (Agence France-Presse)—United States bombing raids over the southern provinces of North Vietnam have caused some 100 casualties since the beginning of the month, according to a communiqué published here today.