

Hanoi Said to Mass Force For Offensive in February

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 30 — American intelligence sources reported today that political officers attached to North Vietnamese and Vietcong units were telling their troops that "decisive blows" must be dealt against United States and South Vietnamese forces while President Nixon visits China in February.

These sources also said that the movement of troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the current dry season, which started late last October, is already calculated at about 30,000 more men than a year ago at this time, thus far a total of roughly 120,000.

North Vietnamese forces shelled South Vietnamese bases guarding the demilitarized zone in the heaviest attack along the northern border since last fall, The Associated Press reported.

According to the intelligence estimates, Communist units have been fanning out from the trail into South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and offi-

cially here and in Saigon expect an early offensive.

In Washington, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird said he expected that the enemy "will try to have several spectaculars this year, probably sometime in February, and undoubtedly again this summer and sometime before the Presidential election here in the United States."

Speaking on "Issues and Answers," a television program of the American Broadcasting Company, Mr. Laird expressed confidence in the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to cope with attacks, adding that "I don't think the people should get into a panic situation, simply because the

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South Vietnamese did conduct several very tough battles during this year."

John Paul Vann, the senior United States civilian adviser in the Military Region II, which includes the threatened Central Highlands, was quoted in an Associated Press dispatch from Saigon as saying: "It is absolutely certain that an offensive will take place. There isn't any question as to what the enemy's intentions are."

Troops Told of Trip

Many officials in Washington and in Saigon have assumed for some time that Hanoi has resolved to mount a major offensive this year embarrass the United States and China when Mr. Nixon arrives in Peking on Feb. 21. The new intelligence reports appear to be the first corroboration of this assumption.

Intelligence sources said that reports from agents, presumably South Vietnamese operatives, cited excerpts from talks by the political officers to the units moving into the combat areas.

The soldiers were reportedly being specifically told that Mr. Nixon was to visit China in February and that was the time when "patriotic forces" should deal "decisive blows" to "North American imperialists and the puppet forces."

Intelligence sources said, available evidence to indicate that the political officers were telling the troops that there was reason to fear a Chinese-American attempt to settle the Indochina war.

American officials have taken it for granted in recent months that Hanoi, which has indicated concern and displeasure over the Nixon journey, would attempt to demonstrate that North Vietnam cannot be ignored in any bargaining an Asian security.

While the prediction of a politically motivated enemy offensive was generally accepted

here, its scope remained a matter of speculation.

Secretary Laird said that a Communist build-up opposite the Central Highlands "has been noticeable during the last two months," but he added that "this is not something new" at this time of year.

Intelligence specialists in Washington said that the size of the movements and the placement of the forces suggested the "strong likelihood" of the biggest action since the 1968 Tet, or Lunar New Year, offensive.

But these specialists said they thought that the expected attacks would not reach the intensity of the 1968 Tet campaign largely because, according to American estimates, the Communists no longer possess a sufficiently effective underground in the cities, notably in Saigon, to produce disruptions timed to the offensive.

Hanoi Seen Adamant

Mr. Vann, the American adviser in Military Region II, said in a Saigon radio interview that North Vietnam might be prepared to accept 10,000 killed to achieve its political objectives.

He said that if the Communists succeeded in taking and holding even briefly the town of Kontum in the Central Highlands, it would provide "a rather graphic display of battle on the television screens and in newspaper pictures."

As repeated again last week after Mr. Nixon's disclosure of his secret peace proposal, Hanoi is still holding out for total withdrawal and removal of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

State Department officials said that the expectation of a major offensive in Vietnam was among the reasons for Mr. Nixon's decision to disclose the secret negotiations with Hanoi. They suggested that Mr. Nixon wanted the diplomatic record to be known in the event that Communist actions led to American reprisals.

On the question of retaliation, Secretary Laird repeatedly refused to indicate what say, "we will protect the reforms it might take, except to maintain American forces."

He said that "we will certainly keep up our options open as far as the use of air power is concerned," but he declined to speculate on or to rule out resumption of United States bombing of North Vietnam.

Mr. Laird said, however "I certainly would rule out" the possibility that President Nixon might consider sending American troops back into Vietnam.

Saigon Units Shelled

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 30 (AP) — North Vietnamese forces struck South Vietnamese bases guarding the demilitarized zone with more than 200 rockets and mortars yesterday in the heaviest shelling attack along the northern border since last fall, the Saigon command reported.

In three ground clashes, 47 North Vietnamese soldiers and six South Vietnamese defenders were killed, the command said.

United States B-52 bombers, fighter-bombers and gunships, tried anew to slow the movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies southward. The bombers dropped 700 to 900 tons of explosives along South Vietnam's border with Laos and inside the southern half of the demilitarized zone.

Many senior United States officials say the main enemy target may be Kontum, a provincial capital of 30,000 in South Vietnam's Central Highlands.

American military sources said a regiment of the North Vietnamese 324-B Division had moved south across the DMZ in recent weeks, while units of another division, not identified, were reported to have moved into the Ashau Valley and the Khesanh region in the northwestern quadrant of South Vietnam.