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Laird: We Will Go on

Bombing

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WASHINGTON — (UPI)

— Defense Secretary Melvin Laird said today the United States would continue bombing North Vietnam and would not negotiate with the Communists until Hanoi pulls its troops back across the Demilitarized Zone.

"There is a continuing major violation of the DMZ taking place at this very minute," Laird told a Pentagon news conference.

Tough Language

"We have indicated a willingness to negotiate at all times, as long as there is a willingness (on the part of Hanoi) for serious negotiations. But, of course, with this violation of the 1968 understandings, they would have to move back across the DMZ."

That was a reference to the so-called 1968 "understanding" whereby President Lyndon Johnson stopped widespread bombing of North Vietnam. U.S. officials said it was based on an understanding that Hanoi would not operate in the Demilitarized Zone, and not shell South Vietnamese cities, among other things.

In the first major administration statement of U.S. policy on the Hanoi attack

—Turn to Page 6, Col. 1

—From Page 1

launched eight days ago, Laird used tough language.

But he stopped short of saying there had been a complete abandonment of the 1968 decision to stop full-scale bombing, and left open the question of how deep into North Vietnam U.S. bombers would operate.

Hundreds of American planes — Air Force and Navy jets — were out today over North Vietnam. Air raid sirens even sounded in Hanoi, according to some Communist reports in European newspapers, but U.S. officials have given no indication the planes will range that far north.

In response to repeated questions whether the bombing halt was off, Laird would only say:

"We are bombing north of the DMZ. We are bombing military targets south of the DMZ, in the DMZ, and north of the DMZ at this time."

But he reaffirmed the U.S. intention to keep withdrawing its ground troops from

Vietnam even though the attack is on.

"Even as the enemy pursued his invasion this week, General (Creighton P.) Abrams protected his men, supported our allies and continued to send Americans home to meet President Nixon's new troop ceiling in South Vietnam of 69,000 by May 1," Laird said. "We will meet or beat that goal."

Laird said U.S. support to the South Vietnamese forces battling the Communists would be limited to aircraft and naval gunfire.

Laird said the South Vietnamese "have the know-how, they have the equipment and they have the capability to pursue an effective ground campaign in their country."

"The North Vietnamese have 12 of their 14 main force regular divisions operating outside their country, marauding throughout Southeast Asia," Laird said.

The Communist forces have attacked Saigon troops on four fronts. The strongest assault — the first one launched — was a drive across the DMZ.