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Laird Talks Of Naval

Blockade

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Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said yesterday that as long as the North Vietnamese continued their invasion of the South, any area of North Vietnam was subject to bombing attack by the United States.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the secretary said he would "not rule out the possibility" that the U.S. might even blockade or mine the harbor of Haiphong unless the invasion was ended.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers told the committee on Monday that the Nixon administration would continue to take "whatever military action is necessary" to halt the enemy offensive.

DENIAL

Laird emphatically denied reports from Saigon that President Nixon had ordered a suspension of the bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area to see whether there would be any political response from the North Vietnamese government.

The White House underscored the denial by saying Laird was "stating the authorized position of the U.S. Government."

In Saigon, however, official U.S. military sources, to whom the reports were attributed, continued to stand by them.

Laird branded the Saigon reports as false. He added:

"The bombing continues south of the demilitarized zone, in the demilitarized zone and north of the demilitarized zone."

Later, during questioning, Laird suggested that the U.S. might take the additional step of attempting to seal off Haiphong, the principal port of North Vietnam.

He said he would "not rule
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out" the possibility that the U.S. might impose a naval quarantine on Haiphong to stop the entry of ships carrying military equipment, or alternatively mine the channel leading into the harbor.

During his four-and-one-half hour appearance before the Senate committee, Laird, like Secretary

of State Rogers in his testimony Monday, took a decidedly hard line on the American response to the North Vietnamese invasion across the demilitarized zone nearly three weeks ago.

PURPOSE

He argued, as did Rogers, that the bombing of North Vietnam was necessary to protect American troops and

to permit the troop withdrawals to continue. But at various points, the defense secretary also clearly indicated that the bombing also had a political purpose of emphasizing the need for military restraint upon both North Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

"We have been very restrained," he said, "but our restraint has been answered by an invasion" across the demilitarized zone in "flagrant, massive violation" of a 1968 understanding that led to the end of the bombing of North Vietnam. Such a violation, he said, "must be treated as a very serious matter" and "could not be dealt with lightly by our government."

So long as the North Vietnamese violation continues, he said, it would be "the height of irresponsibility" for the U.S. to resume peace negotiations. Only when North Vietnam withdraws its forces that invaded across the demilitarized zone, he said, will there be "a viable opportunity" to resume negotiations.

"The level of conflict is being established by the invading forces," he said, "and the level of conflict can be changed by the invaders."

RUSSIA

At another point, Laird clearly suggested that one purpose of the bombing was to impress upon the Soviet Union the necessity of restraining North Vietnam in the use of Soviet-supplied military equipment.

Contending that the North Vietnamese invasion would have been impossible without the supply of Soviet equipment, Laird complained that the Soviet Union has imposed no restraints on how the equipment was to be used.

The U.S., he said, has been "very careful" to provide South Vietnam only military equipment that would give it an "in-country capability" of defending its security. In contrast, he said, the Soviet Union has imposed "no restraints" on the type of equipment provided North Vietnam, with the result that there are now

"12 North Vietnamese divisions marauding all over the countryside in Southeast Asia."

Laird, under questioning by Senator Charles H. Percy, (Rep.-Ill.), said he could not fully explain the Soviet motivation in supporting the North Vietnamese offensive. But he suggested that an underlying reason might be a Soviet desire to continue the war and the American involvement.

So long as the U.S. continues allocating large resources to the war, he said, the Soviets apparently believe they have an advantage in modernizing their own armed forces. He also speculated that the Soviet Union "sees Vietnamization is working, and this concerns them."

Laird pinned his justification for the renewed bombing of North Vietnam largely on the argument that the Hanoi government, with its invasion through the demilitarized zone, had violated a 1968 understanding reached with the Johnson administration.

UNDERSTANDING

As described by Laird, this still secret understanding provided that the U.S. would cease its bombing of North Vietnam while continuing reconnaissance flights, and in return North Vietnam would agree to sit down at the negotiating table with South Vietnam, stop its shelling of major South Vietnamese cities and stop using the demilitarized zone for military purposes.

On the basis of statements by General Maxwell D. Taylor and other unnamed officials in the Johnson administration, Senator Stuart Symington (Dem-Mo.), contended such an understanding had never been accepted by Hanoi.

This was disputed by Laird, who said that a memorandum of conversations by former Ambassador W. Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance, who negotiated the understanding in Paris, clearly showed that North Vietnam "understood what they (the understandings) were all about."