

Washington Aides, Discouraged, Hint At Wider Bombings

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WASHINGTON, May 2 —

Administration officials tried publicly today to put a brave face on their reaction to news of the battle in South Vietnam, but throughout the Government there were widespread signs of growing pessimism.

Well-placed sources in the Nixon Administration hinted that unless the promise of positive results emerged later this week from public or secret peace talks, the United States would soon resume heavy bombing in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas of North Vietnam.

As officials at the White House, the State Department and the Defense Department studied reports of enemy advances in the south, there were these developments:

¶Pentagon officials said American field commanders were being given increasing latitude in conducting air strikes in the southern part of North Vietnam.

¶Diplomatic and Government

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sources revealed that a Soviet freighter had been sunk during the air strike on Haiphong on April 15, but that Moscow had not publicized this event, saw this as evidence it probably would not call off President Nixon's visit, late this month even if the port should be struck again.

¶A State Department spokesman warned of "an element of doubt" whether the United States would continue to participate in public peace talks in Paris, depending on Hanoi's response to the American insistence that the North Vietnamese invasion be the first item of business.

¶The Washington Special Action Group, the principal Administration policy body in the Vietnam crisis, met today for the second time this week. The White House confirmed the meeting but declined to say whether it was held under Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's Adviser on National Security or even whether Mr. Kissinger was still in Washington.

¶The peace talks in Paris, interrupted by the United States, were resumed last Thursday. Another session is scheduled for this Thursday. But the State Department spokesman, Charles W. Bray 3d, emphasized that the United States might stay away from future sessions unless the other side answered satisfactorily questions asked last week concerning the present offensive.

As he embarked on a nine-day trip to Europe, Secretary of State William P. Rogers was asked about the loss of Quangtri. He noted the Administration had expected the loss of some provincial capitals. "But we are encouraged by the courageous fighting of the South Vietnamese," he said.

Other spokesmen echoed this remark, expressing hope that Saigon's army, backed by mounting American air and naval gunfire support, would manage to blunt enemy thrusts toward Hue and Kontum city.

But one military planner privately commented: "The next week or so may prove to be the most crucial of the war. We haven't given up hope, but we're obviously quite worried."

37 Ships at Haiphong

Administration officials said they were convinced that renewed bombing of Haiphong, where 37 ships are now in port, would not result in the Soviet Union's calling off the meeting with Mr. Nixon.

To back their belief, they reported that a Soviet freighter was sunk during the raid by B-52 bombers and fighter-bombers on April 15. Neither Hanoi nor Moscow has publicly protested or even mentioned a sinking they noted.

The Soviet Union did protest that four ships — the Simferopol, the Boris Lavrenev, the Samuil Marshak and the Sel-

emdzha—had been hit by shell fragments during the raid. The United States responded by saying that any damage to vessels was "inadvertent and regrettable."

Diplomatic sources said that North Vietnamese censors had refused to permit Western newsmen, reported to have witnessed the sinking, to mention it in their dispatches.

Threat Voiced by Nixon

The threat of more intensive bombing of North Vietnam was voiced Monday by Mr. Nixon in a discussion with prominent Texans at the ranch of Treasury Secretary John B. Connally.

"We are prepared to use our military and naval strength against military targets throughout North Vietnam," Mr. Nixon said, "and we believe that the North Vietnamese are taking a very great risk if they continue their offensive in the South."

Administration sources declined to specify the broader authority for American commanders in their air strikes. But officials made clear it applied to the area 200 miles north of the border and did not, as yet, extend to the Hanoi and Haiphong areas.

One example of a limitation previously imposed on the field commanders was that they were not to attack military targets within certain specified distances of population centers. It is possible that this distance has been diminished.

Some Pentagon planners pointed out that while heavier air strikes in this area could have an effect on the battle by disrupting the flow of supplies to the combat zone, renewed strikes in the Hanoi or Haiphong areas—if they are ordered—would be aimed at two other objectives.

Saigon Morale a Problem

One, they said, would be to bolster the flagging morale of South Vietnamese troops by demonstrating that if North Vietnam could fire as many as 10,000 artillery shells and rockets into Quangtri, its heartland would not be spared.

The other would be to warn the leaders of North Vietnam, they added, that the price of continuing the offensive throughout the South will become increasingly great.

Asked how the Administration could expect fruitful negotiations if it resumed bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, one official snapped:

"Why not ask North Vietnam how they can expect fruitful negotiations if they attack Hue? Why should we be the only ones asked to show restraint?"

The matter of South Vietnamese morale is mentioned increasingly by military planners. They worry that if North Vietnamese troops, now regrouping and resupplying for an expected push on Hue after the capture of Quangtri, are able to defeat the best division of Saigon's army, the First Infantry Division, at Hue, South Vietnamese military resolve might begin to "unravel."