

Behind Nixon's Decision-- Bombing Wasn't Enough

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The decision to close North Vietnamese ports with mines apparently did not come until top-ranking military advisers concluded that the stepped-up U.S. bombing campaign could not shut off enemy supply movements effectively enough to keep the North Vietnamese from winning crucial victories in the South.

Informed sources said the shut-off of supplies may start to affect the battlefield situation in the northern part of South Vietnam in about two weeks.

But most also predicted that the North Vietnamese Army will carry through with its bid to topple Hue, believed to be the primary target after the capture of Quang Tri.

About 200,000 tons of war materiel a month are reported to have moved through Haiphong—the major receiving point—since last fall. The traffic through the port, limited by its unloading capacity, stepped up significantly prior to the launching of the North Vietnamese offensive.

It is estimated that two-thirds of the North Vietnamese supplies come by sea and 95 percent of these through Haiphong.

Pentagon officials said the United States already had adequate air and naval forces in the area to carry out the President's orders.

The buildup of American forces since the outset of the offensive at the end of March has put about half of the United States Seventh Fleet — some 50 ships — on duty off Vietnam. The United

States has roughly 1000 planes, including about 130 B-52 bombers, available for attacks over North and South Vietnam.

The Soviet Union has no capital ships on Vietnam duty, and the North Vietnamese Navy is made up primarily of small gunboats, although it is reported to have four minesweepers.

Aside from closing North Vietnamese harbors, the President's decision will bring sustained air attacks on two major rail lines between Hanoi and the Chinese border for the first time since the general bombing campaign against North Vietnam stopped in November, 1968.

Although the Pentagon said no substantial air buildup would be required, sources said military commanders in Vietnam will have to be extremely selective in their use of attack aircraft.

In a Vietnam war study, launched by President Nixon's National Security Council the day he took office, there was one estimate that 6000 air attacks per month would be required to keep closed the two railroads

from the Chinese border into North Vietnam.

This still-classified report was leaked to the press last month.

It showed the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that "all of the war-essential imports could be brought into North Vietnam over rail lines or roads from China in the event that imports by sea were successfully denied."

The situation has changed substantially since the study was made, however.

In the current offensive, the North Vietnamese switched from their guerrilla warfare to conventional battles relying heavily on tanks and artillery.

With that development, the North Vietnamese have become even more reliant upon the Soviet Union for their arms, the type of arms shipped by sea.

The first battlefield effect of the Haiphong closing is expected to be a shortage of fuel and petroleum supplies to keep the North Vietnamese tanks in operation.