

AF Officials See No End to War

WASHINGTON (AP)

High Air Force officials believe North Vietnam still is importing considerable amounts of vital military supplies despite the U.S. bombing, and say American involvement in the war could last several more years.

These officials estimate that anywhere from 25 to 50 per cent of North's petroleum, ammunition and other war goods — as compared with pre-bombing amounts—are getting past the American bombing and mine blockade.

They said it is enough to sustain, on a limited basis at least, Hanoi's war effort.

And, they say, it is conceivable that if efforts to negotiate a settlement to the war fail, the American bombing from bases in Thailand and Navy aircraft carriers could last for some time—possibly for three or more years.

This assessment, given to a small group of newsmen Wednesday night, was perhaps one of the more sobering reports on the situation since the North Vietnamese Easter offensive began.

At today's Pentagon briefing for reporters Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim disputed the supply estimates. He described the flow of supplies into North Vietnam as "minimal" and said it was impossible to make any precise estimate. However, he said at one point that 25 per cent was too high.

Friedheim also declared it was "incredible" to think the bombing will continue another three or four years. "The current air interdiction action is a direct result of the enemy invasion across the Demilitarized Zone," he said, adding, however, that it would continue until "the enemy ceases that invasion."

Friedheim reiterated the administration's hope for a negotiated settlement to the war but said if that failed the Vietnamization program would continue with the responsibility for the air and logistics operations turned over to the South Vietnamese.

Although the Pentagon never has asserted that the bombing would shut off the flow of war goods to North Vietnam, administration and military officials have claimed that the flow had been reduced to a trickle.

It was stated in Wednesday night's assessment that the amount of supplies reaching Communist forces in the South

has been drastically curtailed. Before the U.S. resumed the daily bombing of the North in April, Hanoi received 20,000 tons of supplies a month by sea and thousands more by rail.

Senior Air Force officials say the North Vietnamese by using truck shuttles and railroad bypasses, still are able to bring in substantial amounts of supplies from China.

Also, the Communists have built one petroleum pipeline from the Chinese border and are working on a second. U.S. planes have bombed pumping stations along the route but the North Vietnamese quickly rebuild, the officials say.

Supplies are also coming in by sea from Chinese ships anchored offshore which are safe from U.S. air attacks. The goods are then transferred to small North Vietnamese lighters or barges able to avoid the American minefields but vulnerable to U.S. planes. Because of the difficulty in finding these barges, officials say enough get through to keep up a small but steady flow of war material.

Nevertheless, they say the bombing has put heavy pressure on the North and believe that this, coupled with Saigon's ability to hold its ground, will force Hanoi into following one of three options:

—Call off the offensive and withdraw its forces.

—Continue the attack until losses of manpower and supplies become too severe, forcing a return to guerrilla warfare.

—Push the attack even harder in the coming weeks until shortly before the U.S. presidential election in November and then press for a negotiated settlement.