

U.S. AIDES REPORT RAIDS NEAR CHINA

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Bridges Are Bombed Within
25 Miles of Border, Area
Usually Barred to Pilots

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 —

Well-placed Pentagon officials report that United States fighter-bombers, in an effort to choke off the flow of war supplies to North Vietnam, have attacked railroad bridges within 25 miles of the Chinese border on a handful of occasions over the last four months.

While the United States has never announced such a limitation, officials have previously disclosed the existence of a 25-mile buffer zone in which American warplanes are normally forbidden to strike.

In two or three instances, they said, planes strayed very close to Chinese air space before being warned back by American air controllers in large radar planes. In at least one such case, an official said, the Chinese sent some jets into the area.

After the missions were completed, careful plotting of their radar positions convinced Washington officials that the aircraft had not violated the

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Chinese border, the sources said.

The officials stressed that special authority had to be granted by Washington before such targets could be attacked in the buffer zone.

"No real incident was created," one Defense official insisted. "The Chinese never protested; they realized we're trying to avoid violating their air space."

This revelation came amid reports that high Air Force and Defense Department officials were in disagreement about the effectiveness of the bombing campaign and the mining aimed at isolating the Hanoi regime from outside supply.

Last night, a senior Air Force official, who declined to be identified publicly, told a group of reporters that North Vietnam still appeared to be getting supplies in quantities at least 25 per cent as large and possibly as much as 50 per cent as large, as it was before the bombing and mining campaign.

But this morning, at the regular Pentagon briefing, Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, contended that even the 25 per cent estimate appeared to be too high.

Pentagon officials, including the high Air Force source, agreed that precise estimates were impossible. They noted that no one knew with certainty how many trucks and freight cars arrived across the Chinese border each day or precisely what was inside each one.

They also agreed that shortly after the resumption of all-out bombing in mid-April, following the North Vietnamese movement of tanks and troops into South Vietnam, very little arrived overland.

They further agreed that after the mining of five North Vietnamese harbors early in May, most sea supply ended.

But the difference of opinion surrounds the degree of success North Vietnam may have begun to achieve in the last couple of months in attempting to circumvent these obstacles.

After the destruction of several key bridges along the two rail lines from China to the Hanoi area, analysts say, North Vietnam organized an elaborate effort to shuttle supplies arriving in the buffer zone, employing many of its 30,000 to 40,000 trucks, and using barges along inland waterways.

In addition, railroad freight cars have been reported employed to move cargo several miles at a time between blown out bridges, finishing the relay effort with trucks.

Also, the analysts say, a few Chinese freighters have been unloaded onto barges offshore, and the barges then attempt to slip ashore past American destroyers and aircraft.

Once Got 7,000 Tons a Day

Before the bombing and mining campaign, it was estimated that North Vietnam received about 7,000 tons a day by sea and 800 tons a day overland from China.

Some conservative analysts estimate that no significant supplies are now arriving by sea, but that overland traffic into the buffer zone has climbed to 1,000 to 2,000 tons a day.

This would include the gasoline and kerosene coming in through four-inch tactical pipeline from China, but not from a second such line that is not believed to be in operation yet.

Two thousand tons a day would be more than 25 per cent of the previous total movement of supplies.

Other analysts say that the Soviet Union has stepped up the flow of the roughly 500 tons of war material a day it was shipping over Chinese railroads and that some Russian and Soviet-bloc ships appear to be bringing petroleum and ammunition to Chinese ports for transfer by road and rail to North Vietnam. They believe the total supply, therefore, is higher than 2,000 tons a day.

Officials agreed that the handful of raids in the buffer zone were aimed at hampering this increased flow.

But whatever the differences of opinion over how much war material makes it across the border, there are even wider divergences on how much fuel and ammunition and artillery successfully runs the gantlet of air attacks the length of North Vietnam to troops fighting in the south.

Today Mr. Friedheim repeated a recent theme of other officials, that North Vietnam is preparing another major attack, in the Hue or Danang area. This arises from intelligence reports that North Vietnam now has elements of six divisions in the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam and appears to be preparing for an attack before the rainy season sets in there, in four to six weeks.

In another Vietnam-related matter, Mr. Friedheim categorically denied a charge by Daniel Ellsberg that American frogmen were sent on a mission into Haiphong Harbor early in 1969 as a Nixon administration warning gesture.