

All-Out U.S. Attacks on Missile Sites

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Hundreds of U.S. fighter-bombers launched intensified attacks yesterday on North Vietnamese air defense sites in an all-out attempt to cut down the number of B-52 heavy bombers being shot down by missiles.

Thus far, the U.S. military command has acknowledged the loss of 15 of the eight-engine jets to enemy fire since the massive shock bombing raids began over the heavily defended Hanoi-Haiphong region on December 18.

However, authoritative sources report that the toll on the nearly 200-plane U.S. B-52 fleet in Southeast Asia has actually been greater.

These informants say that at least six other B-52s, and possibly a few more, suffered enough damage from SAM missile explosions to be permanently knocked out of action, even though the planes made it safely back to their bases.

OPINION

Despite this combined source of loss, which amounts to more than 10 per cent of the B-52s based in Thailand and on Guam, opinion among most civilian and military officials at the Pentagon is that the loss rate is still not excessive or unexpected — at least in terms of airplanes rather than crewmen — in the face of the thick enemy defenses.

There is some concern, however, about the effect on the entire U.S. Strategic Air Command bomber fleet if the raids continue for some time and the loss rate is not cut.

The Air Force had 397 B-52s operational, including the nearly 200 being used in Vietnam, before the heavy raids began.

The heavy missile firings, at least in the view of some specialists, may also be taking a mental toll on some U.S. B-52 air crews.

For the B-52s to bomb with anything approaching precision, they must stay on a steady course and altitude for at least a few minutes, during which they are good targets.

Trying to maneuver out of the path of these missiles or hurrying their bomb run will obviously throw their bombs off target and would help to

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explain reports of large scale devastation to civilian areas in the Hanoi vicinity.

AIM

In the air war itself, the United States was reported to be carrying out an aerial campaign aimed at total destruction of North Vietnam's industrial heartland before halting the bombing and resuming peace negotiations.

And South Vietnamese officials disclosed that the Saigon government would declare a brief cease-fire for

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the New Year on Monday, possibly paralleled by a U.S. bombing halt over North Vietnam similar to a 36-hour cessation during the Christmas holidays earlier this week.

The Viet Cong has announced a 24-hour cease-fire effective at 1 p.m. Saigon time tomorrow.

U.S. officials in Saigon indicated today that there will be a bombing halt to correspond with the cease-fire, but no official statement was made.

INTENSITY

U.S. officials said raids above the 20th parallel concentrated in the Hanoi-Haiphong heartland continued yesterday and today in the same unprecedented intensity as when they were first resumed on December 8 after the secret negotiations in Paris broke down.

These officials acknowledged that they are the heaviest sustained blows of the war, aimed at crippling the daily life of Hanoi and Haiphong and destroying North Vietnam's ability to support forces in South Vietnam.

The ultimate purpose is punishing Hanoi enough so that it will sign a peace agreement, they added.

THIEU

Official South Vietnamese sources said President Nguyen Van Thieu has been told that President Nixon's strategy is to devastate North Vietnam, then halt the bombing.

Mr. Nixon's plan was outlined to Thieu by U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and General Frederick C. Weyand, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam Thursday, the sources said.

The South Vietnamese sources reported Bunker and Weyand told Thieu that it is believed American air power of the intensity now being used can complete the job quickly.