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U.S. Officials Say Hanoi Drive Violates 1968 Accord

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WASHINGTON, April 2—

Senior Administration officials asserted today that North Vietnam's offensive across the demilitarized zone was a clear violation of the 1968 understanding that produced an end to the systematic American bombing of North Vietnam and the start of substantive talks in Paris on concluding the Vietnam war.

Convinced that the main goal of the Communist drive was the demoralization of the South Vietnamese and American peoples, the officials sought to avoid giving any impression of shock or undue concern over the reports from the field.

"We are definitely not pressing the panic button," one official said.

For the most part, senior officials were at home celebrating Easter with their families, receiving up-to-date briefings from Pentagon and State Department duty officers by telephone.

A Straight-Out Invasion

A top State Department official, reached at his home, said that the offensive was "a straight-out, conventional land-warfare invasion" by North Vietnam across the DMZ. But he said that the best estimate in Washington was that the enemy, even if able to enter Quangtri city, the main populated area and capital of South Vietnam's northernmost province, would not try to hold it.

"Once we get some decent weather, we'll be able to clobber them," one official commented, referring to the ham-

pering of United States air power by cloudy skies in the assault area.

Senator George S. McGovern, Democrat of South Dakota, said today on the Columbia Broadcasting System program, "Issues and Answers," that the attack convinced him more than ever that the Vietnam war was a "hopeless venture" and that the United States should make a deal setting a final date for withdrawal in return for the release of American prisoners.

The White House said that President Nixon, who was spending the holiday at nearby Camp David, continued to follow developments in Vietnam closely by phone and remained confident that the South Vietnamese forces would be able to hold their own.

Nixon Gets Abrams's View

The long-awaited offensive will prove the first real test of the Vietnamization program, Administration officials said. They refused to get into what they called "hypothetical" discussions about the possible impact the offensive would have on politics in this country. They advised waiting to see how the fighting turns out in the next few days.

At his last news conference on March 24, Mr. Nixon said that he had been assured by Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the United States commander in South Vietnam, that while the South Vietnamese lines might "bend," they would be able to withstand the expected offensive.

One senior official said that

"the real news" in the attack was the disregard shown by Hanoi for the 1968 understanding that led to the complete halt by President Johnson of American air attacks on North Vietnam.

The understanding, as described by President Johnson in October of that year, was aimed at producing a breakthrough at the Paris discussions begun that May.

The Johnson Administration responded to the long-standing Hanoi demand for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam by linking the halt to assurances from Hanoi that it would not violate the demilitarized zone or launch attacks on cities or other populated areas in South Vietnam. These assurances were by no means contractual or formal. But Administration officials said at the time they had "reason to believe" Hanoi had given them these assurances.

The Johnson Administration claimed the right to carry on reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam.

No Progress in Paris

Over these three and a half years, however, the Paris talks have failed to make any progress and since 1968 have steadily eroded.

North Vietnamese gunners have fired missiles and shells at American aircraft flying over North Vietnam and on missions in nearby Laos. In retaliation, planes in so-called "protective-section" stinks, have attacked North Vietnam antiaircraft and radar positions.

The North Vietnamese have

never publicly acknowledged making any concessions to achieve the halt in American bombing raids, and they have denied that they ever came to any understanding permitting the reconnaissance flights.

Two weeks ago, William J. Porter, the American representative at the Paris talks, announced an indefinite suspension in the talks until the Communist side showed a desire for "serious discussions." Mr. Nixon, who said he had ordered the suspension, said that Hanoi was using the talks for a "propaganda filibuster."

Administration officials, in asserting that the crossing of the DMZ was a "cynical" violation of the 1968 accord, refused to predict whether the United States would now feel free to resume air attacks on North Vietnamese targets.