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Nixon Firm

On Troop

Withdrawal

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Washington

President Nixon is determined to bring United States troop strength in Vietnam down to 69,000 by May 1, as promised, but he has made no decision regarding the next phase of the withdrawal program, the White House said yesterday.

The President will make another decision on the withdrawal program "based on the circumstances" and give an announcement before May 1, press secretary Ronald Ziegler said.

Mr. Nixon is sending more air and sea power to support the South Vietnamese, to protect American forces in South Vietnam and "to assure the continuance of our withdrawal program," Ziegler said.

SHIPS

Despite a continuing reduction of forces in South Vietnam, there are nearly 35,000 men aboard Navy ships offshore — a figure that has almost doubled in recent weeks — and more than 30,000 servicemen — mostly Air Force — in neighboring Thailand.

Senate minority leader Hugh Scott (Rep.-Pa.) and House minority leader Ger-

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ald R. Ford (Rep.-Mich.) told reporters after a GOP leadership meeting with the President that the South Vietnamese are doing well in resisting the latest North Vietnamese attack and that the country supports the President in his use of air and sea power.

Ford first raised the possibility that the next withdrawal announcement might be postponed. Declaring that there "has never been a commitment in previous withdrawals that one would automatically follow," Ford said, however, that he was not suggesting a halt would be ordered.

"I don't think you can assume anything at this point," Ford said.

SCOTT

Scott said, however, that "the withdrawals are continuing, and to the best of my knowledge, and to the best of my judgment, will continue. Suitable announcements will be made at the President's discretion."

Attempting to clarify the conflicting comments, Ziegler said, "It is our intention and hope and policy to continue with troop withdrawals, but I will not predict what decision the President will make . . . The actions we are taking are to support the withdrawal program."

Since the beginning of the withdrawal program, the

President has said his decisions are made on the basis of three factors: The level of enemy activity, the ability of South Vietnam to assume its own defense and the willingness of the Communists to negotiate.

PARIS

Ziegler has maintained since the pre-Easter halt of negotiations in Paris that they could be resumed at any time the Communist delegates want to negotiate seriously.

He emphasized that when the history of this period is made known "the United States will not be found wanting" in efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement — an echo of words the President used on several occasions before he disclosed in January that Henry Kissinger, assistant for national security affairs, had met secretly with North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris.

When reporters told Ziegler that he sounded as though he knew much more than he was willing to say about recent peace efforts, he repeated his comment that the American record would "not be found wanting." But he gave no details.

The responsibility for the fighting rests with North Vietnam, he emphasized, "because of their failure to seek a negotiated settlement."

Ziegler accused the North Vietnamese of resorting to propaganda "to divert attention from the failure on their part to negotiate."

"They built up supplies and they were preparing for this invasion at the very time when they knew full well there was a negotiating solution available to be talked about, and they chose not to accept that," he said.

"Our position is we are ready for serious negotiations. They apparently are not."

DISPLEASURE

In a related development, the U.S. expressed formal displeasure to the French government for requesting that the Vietnam peace talks be resumed without delay.

The State Department said the French were told their call was one-sided and made without notifying the United States.

Press officer Robert J. McCloskey said the French request is similar to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong demands and that serious negotiations cannot be made under military pressure.

The administration said U.S. negotiator William J. Porter will have a further statement later on the negotiations.

On Capitol Hill, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) said: "How can any nation that genuinely desires peace be absent from the peace table at a time like this?"