

DETAILS OF RAIDS KEPT SECRET IN SAIGON

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Saigon, South Vietnam, Nov. 22 - The United States command has imposed an almost total blackout on information about the American air raids against North Vietnam yesterday, including routine details normally made public after similar raids in the past.

The command spokesman limited his remarks to reading the second statement by secretary of defense Melvin R Laird on the raids. The statement, issued at noon yesterday in Washington, said that the raids had ended at 7 A.M. Saigon time, or 28 and a half hours after the Hanoi radio said they had begun.

To all questions by reporters, which were put very sharply at times, the spokesman replied: "I have nothing further to add to the statement I've just read."

The spokesman turned away all questions about the number of planes involved in the raids, the nature and location of the targets and the loss of any aircraft.

Speculation on Raids

The effect of the official silence was to promote speculation among observers here about two possible results of the raids.

First, one or more aircraft may have been shot down and rescue operations for the missing pilots may still be under way. The military command has always withheld information about operations in progress for fear of providing information to the enemy.

It is believed this concern lies behind Secretary Laird's closing words in his first statement: "To comment further could jeopardize the safety and security of Americans. Therefore, I have nothing to add at this time."

Second, the raids may have included North Vietnamese supply dumps of matériel believed to be intended for the war in South Vietnam. The command has been drawing attention to a reported increase in stockpiles of matériel just north of the demilitarized zone for the last month, and has connected the supplies with the possibility of a spring offensive against South Vietnam's northern provinces.

Mr. Laird's statement that raids were conducted against "antiaircraft gunsites and related facilities" could be broadly interpreted to mean that the "related facilities" included enemy stockpiles. United States spokesmen here have steadfastly refused to venture beyond Mr. Laird's description of the targets. However, one officer pointed out that related facilities would normally refer to such installations as the radar units used to guide surface-to-air missiles and stockpiles of antiaircraft ammunition.

Although the command would not disclose the number of aircraft involved, it is believed here that the length of the raids suggests that more planes were used than would be needed against antiaircraft installations alone.

All these questions point to the extreme political delicacy of the United States position in regard to the raids. Mr. Laird departed from the restrictions on information imposed here only to deny the statement by the Hanoi radio that American prisoners of war were hit during the strikes.

Spokesmen said that it was the policy of the command here not to comment on Hanoi radio statements and so had refused to reply to questions about the raids until word had arrived from Washington.

One officer said here that the Pentagon and commanders here were withholding all information about the raids from even subordinates who are normally allowed to share in restricted information.

"It's all on the need-to-know basis," the officer said, "and right now they figure nobody needs to know."
