

LAIRD WOULD SEEK BOMBING IF ENEMY BREACHED 'ACCORD'

Before Senate Unit, He Also Calls for Strong Action if Prisoners Are Harmed

RESCUE MISSION UPHELD

Intelligence Was Excellent, Secretary Insists — Stand Is Derided by Fulbright

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Excerpts from the testimony by Laird, Page 8.

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 24 — Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that he would recommend to President Nixon the resumption of full-scale air attacks on North Vietnam if the enemy engaged in major violations of the understanding with the United States that halted the bombing two years ago.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Laird said that "I would recommend calling off that cessation of bombing should there be major violations of these understandings."

He refused to elaborate what in his judgment would constitute such violations, but he told the Senators: "I have always said that if a major force, a force comes across the demilitarized zone, I would be strong in my recommendation. I may not be supported, but I would recommend that we commence bombing."

Questions Often Acrimonious

Under persistent and often acrimonious questioning by members of the committee, Mr. Laird also warned that he would propose strong measures if American prisoners of war in North Vietnam were punished for the unsuccessful attempt

last weekend to free those believed to be held at a camp near Hanoi.

He acknowledged that the United States was considering other action to release the prisoners, though he brusquely told the committee that he did not care to discuss what measures might be taken either to bring their freedom or to retaliate for punishment against them.

The two-and-a-half-hour session, the first live nationally televised hearing before the senate foreign relations committee in 20 months, was occasioned by Mr. Laird's disclosure yesterday of the abortive mission by an Air Force-Army team of volunteers, who raided a camp 23 miles west of Hanoi.

Members of the public and many newsmen in the crowded hearing room burst out laughing when Mr. Laird insisted that United States intelligence in planning the rescue operation was "excellent."

Somewhat flushed, the Secretary said that all the advance information on the location of the prison compound was correct down to the smallest de-

Continued on Page 8, Column 1 tail, but that intelligence could not know that the prisoners had been moved elsewhere because the United States does not possess a camera that "can see through roofs."

He frequently returned to the subject of such a camera, saying at one point that he would favor spending "millions of dollars on developing such a device.

That came when Senator J. W. Fulbright, the committee chairman, said mockingly that the unsuccessful raid proved the United States was "not getting its money's worth" for billions of dollars spent on intelligence activities.

The Secretary of Defense said that in view of Hanoi's rejection of a United States proposal for the exchange of all war prisoners, "I certainly will look at every possible avenue to see that they are freed."

"I intend to recommend, as the Secretary of Defense, every possible avenue of approach so that the prisoners of war are free men," he said.

Speaking in excited tones, Mr. Laird told the Senators that "if this country is willing to abandon its men to death and

captivity, we would have truly lost our national morality."

He said that the decision to send the raiding party was finally made when the Administration learned that six prisoners had died in the North Vietnamese prisons. Subsequently, he said, "unconfirmed"

reports were received of the death of 11 more.

As was the case at a closed meeting this morning before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the questioning of Mr. Laird by 10 members of the Foreign Relations Committee dealt both with the weekend air strikes at North Vietnam and the helicopter raid designed to free prisoners estimated by the Secretary to number 70.

Both in his prepared statement and in answers to questions, Mr. Laird sought to present the two events as isolated even though they occurred at virtually the same time.

He defended the "protective reaction" strikes at targets in North Vietnam as the proper response to what he termed enemy violations of the understanding reached in Paris in November, 1968. He defended the search-and-rescue raid in Sontay as a separately planned operation to show the prisoners and the world that the United States "cares about them."

Senator Fulbright and Secretary Laird constantly and often angrily interrupted each other, with Mr. Fulbright finally saying that the Secretary reminded him of former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, long an object of his antagonism.

Mr. Laird finally summed up the Administration's policy on both the air strikes and the rescue operation when Senator Jacob K. Javits, Republican of New York, asked him what "signals" it had intended to send to Hanoi in staging the two operations.

The air strikes, Mr. Laird declared, were "a signal that we would not tolerate the setting aside of the understanding on theh cessation of bombings."

On the prisoners' rescue, he said that the signal was that "we are concerned" about them and that "we shall have rather unusual means to assure that they will return as free men."

Responding to Mr. Javits's question whether the United States had sent a "signal" to Hanoi that it would call off the bombing halt, Mr. Laird defined his hand on a renewal. He refused, however, to be drawn into a discussion of what would constitute "major violations."

The Secretary evaded a question whether another downing of an unarmed United States reconnaissance aircraft over North Vietnam could be construed as such a violation except to say that it would result in "immediate protective reactions." That was the official reason for the weekend bombing raids.

Elsewhere in his testimony, Mr. Laird insisted that the Nixon Administration's basic policy of seeking a negotiated settlement had not changed as a result of the recent raids.

He listed the North Vietnamese acceptance of flights by unarmed reconnaissance craft, an agreement to refrain from the shelling of major South Vietnamese population centers and from infiltration through the demilitarized zone, and the sitting of the South Vietnamese delegation at the Paris talks as Hanoi's side of the "understanding."

The United States' obligation, he added, was to abandon the bombings.

Without elaboration, Mr. Laird said that the United States gave Hanoi "a message" a week before the weekend strikes that it believed the understanding was being violated.

North Vietnam has steadfastly refused to acknowledge the existence of an understanding, but Mr. Laird said that Hanoi was fully aware of it. He said the agreement was an unwritten one and that the Nixon Administration had been informed of it by the outgoing Johnson Administration early in 1969.