

LAIRD TO CONSULT ABRAMS ON TROOPS

To Visit Saigon Next Month
—May Speed Withdrawal

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 15—

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird announced today that he would visit South Vietnam early next month to confer with Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the American field commander, on the prospect for troop reductions.

A well placed Pentagon official explained later that the principal purpose of the trip would be to determine whether United States withdrawals could safely be stepped up by some "thousands" over the first half of next year.

Under a plan announced by President Nixon last spring, the number of United States troops in Vietnam is scheduled to drop to 284,000 men by May 1. The current number is 343,700.

Pentagon sources said Mr. Laird wanted to discuss with General Abrams whether this withdrawal goal could be increased before making a recommendation to the President.

Disclaims Policy Change

In a Pentagon news conference, Mr. Laird also makes these points:

☐ "There has been no basic change of policy" regarding the bombing of North Vietnam from that of the previous Administration.

☐ Plans have been completed, with details to be announced within a week, for the destruction of biological weapons. President Nixon said in November, 1969, that the United States would never use germ weapons and pledged the destruction of our germ warfare stockpile at Pine Bluff, Ark. Sources report that agents stockpiled include tularemia, Q fever, anthrax and Venezuelan equine encephalitis. The stocks also reportedly include 45,000 bullets and darts containing botulinum toxin.

☐ The Pentagon consulted with the Central Intelligence agency on a continuing basis from last May on plans for the raid on the prisoner of war camp at Sontay in North Vietnam and that agency did not suggest it had evidence there were no Americans at Sontay.

Mr. Laird said that on Dec. 5, accompanied by Adm. James H. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he planned to leave for Vietnam. The first leg of the trip would take him to Saigon and Sontay.

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