

# Laird Says He Will Go on a Vietnam Inspection Trip

Washington

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird announced yesterday he will fly to Vietnam next month for a personal assessment—and he said there is nothing developing militarily that would delay the U.S. troop pullout timetable.

Laird told a Pentagon news conference that he and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will leave January 5 for meetings in Paris with U.S. peace negotiators, then fly on to Thailand and ultimately South Vietnam.

The purpose of Laird's first visit to the war zone in about a year, he said, is:

"To assess the progress of the Vietnamization program; to assess the military situation in Southeast Asia; to assess the military assistance programs; and also to confer with General Creighton W. Abrams on what lies ahead as far as further troop reductions" are concerned.

Under questioning, Laird said "there is nothing developing militarily that would cause us not to meet or beat the May goal of reducing U.S. forces in Vietnam to 284,000 men.

Despite President Nixon's assertion last week that the United States would bomb North Vietnam if there were a dangerous buildup or serious rise in the level of fight-

ing in South Vietnam, Laird insisted "there's been no basic change in policy" on bombing.

In the past, the administration has used other grounds for U.S. warplane strikes against targets in the North—enemy firing on U.S. reconnaissance planes, serious violations of the DMZ by infiltrators, or shelling of South Vietnamese cities.

In an unusual action, he read excerpts from a background briefing given the night President Johnson ordered a total halt in the bombing of North Vietnam on Oct. 31, 1968.

Without identifying the defense officials who held the briefing, Laird quoted them as saying a decision could be made to resume bombing of the North if "it is ascertained (Vietnamese) are not proceeding in good faith in their negotiations and that efforts are being made to violate the good-faith understanding by movements of one kind or another."

Laird indicated that this still holds.

When the recent unsuccessful Son Tay prisoner-of-war rescue mission was brought up, Laird said, "I am willing to go forward with this kind of operation in the future if time and circumstances" permit.

More explicitly than before, Laird asserted that "we are going to maintain a U.S.

presence in Vietnam until a satisfactory solution can be worked out" on freeing U.S. military men now held prisoner by North Vietnam.

Current U.S. plans call for retaining between 20,000 and 40,000 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam for an indefinite period unless there is a negotiated total mutual troop pullout.

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