

Peace Hint Seen In Air War Lull

SAIGON — (AP) — Despite perfect weather and a multitude of prime military targets, the United States has sharply curtailed its bombing of North Vietnam and put the Hanoi-Haiphong heartland off limits to aerial raiders, U.S. military sources said here today.

The sources emphasized, however, that President Nixon likely would resume widespread bombing in the North if there is no positive signal from Hanoi that it would end the current general offensive in South Vietnam.

One source noted that strikes now are running at less than a dozen a day following the huge raids Sunday that included strikes in the Hanoi and Haiphong areas.

The curtailment, "to feel Hanoi out," as one informant said, came as Hanoi's delegation to the Paris peace talks said yesterday if the bombing stopped, it was ready to start secret negotiations on ending the war.

Battles Dwindle

Perhaps only coincidentally, war communiques showed the ground war in the South to have dwindled dramatically. There were no reported major battles or white hot crisis points.

Military sources here said bombing now was restricted by the President to targets below the 20th parallel of latitude, 60 miles south of Hanoi and Haiphong. Sunday's raids around those cities are termed "a one-shot deal," at least for now, by U.S. military sources.

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird said in Washington there was "no substance" to the report of bombing restrictions. A white House

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spokesman said this was the authorized official position.

However, told of Laird's remark, informants here said they stuck to the position that Nixon had laid down the bombing restrictions.

Laird Hedges

Later in the day, Laird declined to say specifically whether raids are continuing at Haiphong and in Hanoi's vicinity.

Asked by Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.) at a Senate Foreign Relations hearing in Washington whether the raids in those areas are still going on, Laird replied, "I am not going to outline target areas."

It appeared possible that Washington's public position might, as it often has in the past, mask behind the scene moves. One possibility was that without a naked public threat to resume full-scale bombing unless Hanoi calls off its offensive, the North Vietnamese could do so without losing face.

Nixon's Purpose

Informed military sources here said that from a tactical standpoint it did not make sense to hit the North Vietnamese heartland with hundreds of strikes, then suddenly drop down to a handful in the southern-most provinces.

"But this is not a military situation," said one source.

"The tactical part of it is not of primary importance. This is a political thing.

"The President is trying to feel out what North Vietnam is going to do. It takes time to find out what the other side is going to do. The signs are not that clear."