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U.S. Launches Massive Raids On SAM Sites

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Hundreds of U.S. fighter-bombers launched intensified attacks yesterday on North Vietnamese air defense sites in an all-out attempt to cut down the number of B-52 heavy bombers being shot down by SAM missiles.

Thus far, the U.S. military command has acknowledged the loss of 15 of the eight-engine jets to enemy fire since the massive bombing raids began over the heavily defended Hanoi-Haiphong region on Dec. 18.

However, authoritative sources report that the toll on the nearly 200-plane U.S. B-52 fleet in Southeast Asia has actually been greater.

These informants say that at least six other B-52s, and possibly a few more, suffered enough damage from SAM missile explosions to be permanently knocked out of action, even though the planes made it safely back to their bases.

"Eventually," said one military aide, "they will show up in somebody's loss column."

Despite this combined source of loss, which amounts to more than 10 per cent of the B-52s based in Thailand and on Guam, opinion among most civilian and military officials at the Pentagon is that the loss rate is still not excessive or unexpected—at least in terms of airplanes rather than crewmen—in the face of the thick enemy defenses.

There is some concern, however, about the effect on the entire U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) bomber fleet if the raids continue for some time and the loss rate is not cut.

The Air Force had 397 B-52s operational, including the nearly 200 being used in Vietnam, before the heavy raids began. The plane has not been in production for about 10 years.

If losses continue at the same pace, then 10 per cent of the entire SAC fleet may be victimized by Hanoi's SAM missile crews by the end of the next week or two.

Some military and civilian officials, since the first days of the bombing and the early B-52 losses, have maintained that the North Vietnamese would soon run low in SAMs, which are still being fired at about a 100-a-day clip. They also have said that U.S. planes would soon figure out a good way to evade or neutralize those defenses.

This view, however, is not shared by other Pentagon specialists. They say there is still no evidence of a SAM shortage. They suggest that North Vietnam is operating the ra-

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dars used to guide these missiles in a different fashion and thus is making it more difficult for U.S. planes to knock them out or jam them.

The intensified strikes by the fighter-bombers are meant to ease the situation.

The heavy SAM firings, at least in the view of some specialists, may also be taking a mental toll on some U.S. B-52 aircrews who must fly through those defenses every other day after years of flying against undefended targets in South Vietnam.

For the B-52s to bomb with anything approaching precision, they must stay on a steady course and altitude for at least a few minutes, during which they are good targets.

Trying to maneuver out of the path of these missiles or hurrying their bomb run will throw their bombs off target and would help to explain reports of large-scale devastation to civilian areas in the Hanoi vicinity.

Yesterday, the Pentagon added one more potential reason for reports of extensive civilian bomb damage around Hanoi.

Under questioning by news-

men about the cause, Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim suggested that some of the damage may be due to B-52s crashing into the city after being hit by the SAMs.

Friedheim said, "We know of instances where B-52s have been shot down and crashed in the city." The Pentagon spokesman also reiterated the oft-stated possibility that some SAM missiles may have landed in Hanoi, some exploding and others not.

The Pentagon, as has been the case since the renewed bombing began, has declined to comment at all on the extent of civilian damage in the north, insisting that only military targets were being aimed at.

As to reports from Communist and other news agencies based in Hanoi or from Swedish diplomats, Friedheim said he would also "not attempt to address everyone of those stories coming out of Hanoi." He described some of the reports as products of "escorted tours" for newsmen by the North Vietnamese, and said he was "not surprised that they would have conducted those tours. They've done it before."

Friedheim said the raids were obviously at "a very high level and that they are contin-

uing at roughly the same level."

Radio Hanoi has claimed 76 U.S. planes have been downed, including 33 B-52s.

Should the B-52 losses continue, Pentagon sources suggest that one option would be to cut back on the use of the big and more vulnerable bombers and keep up the attacks with the smaller fighter-bombers. This would cut down on the substantial shock effects of the bombing, however.

Some military sources report that in a few cases the B-52s were used against some targets close to Hanoi where the shock effect of their bombing—with 30 tons of bombs in each plane—could be felt and then the same target was hit again by the smaller fighter-bombers carrying much more accurate bombs to knock out the target.

About 120 of the entire SAC B-52 fleet are older "D" model bombers which were specially modified several years ago to carry conventional as well as nuclear bombs.

Officials note this in pointing out that despite heavy losses, the United States has a long way to go before it actually cuts into the main part of the SAC fleet used for nuclear deterrence.