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U.S. Mum On Bomb Damages

By Peter Osnos

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SAIGON, Jan. 4—The United States command is withholding a summary of damage inflicted during the second week of its massive bombing of the North Vietnamese heartland because it believes its publication might adversely effect the peace talks in Paris, military sources said today.

"You can imagine how it would look to Le Duc Tho [Hanoi's chief negotiator] if we were to release a great long laundry list of damage these days," said one officer, citing this concern, as the only reason for not making the data public.

He said the decision not to release the bomb damage summary has "nothing to do with supposed civilian casualties or congressional votes. We just don't want to interfere in the negotiating process".

Yesterday, a command spokesman told the regular daily briefing for newsmen that a report would be ready today covering the period from Dec. 26, when the Christmas bombing halt ended, until Dec. 30, when President Nixon again limited raids to below the 20th parallel.

It was expected that the report would be similar to the one released last Wednesday covering the first week of the bombing. That report said that U.S. warplanes had hit air fields, power plants, rail facilities and docks, mostly in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.

The summary, acknowledged by spokesmen to be incomplete, did not mention hitting civilian targets. The Pentagon has since conceded that Hanoi's civilian air field and North Vietnam's largest hospital were "accidentally" damaged.

At today's briefing, the command spokesman, Maj. Jere Forbus, announced that the summary was not available and he could not say when it would be. Pressed for some explanation of the delay Forbus said, "I have nothing further on that at this time."

The explanation of the delay, linking the report to the Paris talks, was provided by senior officers as guidance to reporters inquiring when the damage data would be disclosed. "They'll just have to get up there and say it will be released when ready and take their lumps," said one officer describing the instructions given spokesmen.

The command, under orders from the Pentagon, has been consistently tightlipped about the heavy bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area from the time it began Dec. 18, except for last week's report.

On a daily basis, no details were provided on missions or targets, ostensibly as a protective measure for flight crews. What little was known about the operation came from the Pentagon and unusually precise accounts from Radio Hanoi and Communist news services.

The command has now reverted to its former practice of listing the number of missions flown, preliminary damage assessments and the general target areas of B-52s. The clamp down on information evidently applied only to the now suspended Hanoi-Haiphong raids.

Radio Hanoi today broadcast another lengthy and detailed account of what the North Vietnamese government claims American warplanes did during the strikes, listing dozens of civilian targets that were hit and destroyed. This report, however, also ends with the Christmas pause and contains no specifics on the later period.