

U.S. Press in Dark On Bombing Raids

WASHINGTON (AP) — Throughout the stepped-up bombing of the North Vietnamese industrial heartland around Hanoi and Haiphong at the close of 1972, the Pentagon withheld details of the raids, citing the need to protect American air crews.

With the bombing suspended again, the Pentagon still refuses to release information on the year-end raids, now citing the renewed Paris peace talks.

"No information will be put out of this building at any time that will possibly jeopardize the success of those negotiations," Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said Friday.

Laird ordered that bomb-damage reports detailing targets struck not be made public.

Laird did not explain how release of the information, which newsmen understood eventually would be made available, would affect the negotiations.

Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim, when asked about the blackout, would only say that Laird's action was dictated by the White House. Other sources said it was directed by Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's chief negotiator.

The policy of restricting the flow of information is one that has prevailed throughout the war whenever there was a stepup in U.S. military activity. It occurred in 1970 when U.S. troops crossed into Cambodia and again in 1971 during Allied strikes into Laos.

At the Pentagon, newsmen question official spokesmen at the daily press briefing in an effort to learn of American military actions. But the answers are negative and sometimes tempers flare.

The following excerpts of exchanges between Friedheim and reporters over the past three weeks are an example:

DEC. 19:

Q. Can you tell us, in general, what sort of targets are

being struck?

A. No, I can't give you target details today.

Q. What are you telling us ... That we should listen to Radio Hanoi to find out what we're doing over there? Why can't you tell us?

A. I don't have those details for you.

DEC. 20:

Q. When will we be able to get lists of targets by type and location?

A. We never discuss specific target locations . . . We are providing you the best information we can. We are, of course, trying to protect at all times the safety and security of the air crews that are flying in what is obviously a very heavily defended area, and we are not, at this point, of the opinion that a detailed discussion of tactics and rules of engagement specific target locations, would enhance the safety of those crews, and therefore we're withholding that specific information.

DEC. 21:

Q. What's been the tonnage dropped in the last three days?

A. I don't have a tonnage figure for you.

Q. Do you get reports on tonnage?

A. I assume that those will become available, I haven't seen that available here.

JAN. 2:

Q. Can you make one more effort to explain to us what the purpose of this bombing campaign was and whether or not you can say that, could you say yes or no to the following question: Did it succeed its purpose?

A. No. I won't address either of those questions today given the serious and sensitive nature of the resumed technical talks in the coming negotiations.

JAN. 3:

Q. When do you expect to have more information that you can give us on this operation?

A. I don't know, I just don't have anything further today.

JAN. 4:

Q. There are reports in Saigon that the administration has told MACV (the U.S. command in Vietnam) not to release damage reports, at least to delay them. Is that true?

A. We do hope to have a summary for you as soon as we can. They're still working on that.

JAN. 5:

Q. How then would it affect the negotiations since we all assume that the North Vietnamese are aware what targets were hit? The security of air crews would not be impaired since the air crews are not going back up there. How does the release of the photos bear on the negotiations?

A. I won't discuss that.

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