

S. Vietnam Ready, Laird Tells Panel

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird told Congress today South Vietnam is virtually ready to take over its own full defense if the Paris peace talks fail.

But Laird repeated President Nixon's stand the United States will stay in the war until American prisoners are released and Hanoi accounts for the missing in action.

"Vietnamization is virtually complete," Laird told the House Armed Services Committee. "... There will be no reason for the United States to maintain a role in logistics, air or ground combat."

But Laird repeated again at that point that regardless of South Vietnam's ability, "there will be no complete U.S. withdrawal until American prisoners are released and GIs missing in enemy territory are accounted for.

Chairman F. Edward Hebert, D-La., in questioning Laird said he interpreted his statement as meaning the key to the negotiations in Paris revolve around American prisoners and the missing in action.

But Laird said, "I do not want to make any statement to in any way jeopardize the talks in Paris."

He said he and Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, are ready to give the House Armed Services and Appropriations committees complete information in the war in executive session Tuesday.

Hebert said "well-intentioned but perhaps emotionally upset people have spewed the North Vietnamese line," and added: "The most impor-

tant thing is an honorable peace and an honorable peace rests solely on release of American prisoners and an accounting of the missing."

Laird's 104-page report reviewed his four-year stewardship of the Pentagon and his recommendations for the future, but made no reference to the recent heavy bombing of North Vietnam.

But as the first high-level administration official to go before Congress since the bombing was broadened on Dec. 16 and then restricted to below the 20th Parallel Dec. 30, Laird was certain to be questioned closely on the matter.

The defense secretary said the equipment and training provided Saigon in the Vietnamization program, of which he has been an architect, "has significantly enhanced the prospect for successful negotiations, but should negotiations fail, Vietnamization makes possible the complete termination of American involvement in the war."

This, he added, is contingent on the safe return of American POWs and an accounting of the missing in action.

Laird, who leaves office Jan. 20, apparently believes that even if President Nixon's efforts to reach a broader peace settlement for Indochina fail, South Vietnam is now strong enough to hold on even with the presence of an estimated 140,000 North Vietnamese troops within its borders. One of Saigon's principal objections to the proposed peace settlement is its failure to provide for withdrawal of Communist forces.