

LAIRD SAYS SAIGON IS READY ON ARMS

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Calls Vietnamization Ended, With Army Fully Capable of Providing Security

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8—Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird told the House Armed Services Committee today that "from a military standpoint, the Vietnamization program has been completed."

In the first public appearance by a Cabinet member before a Congressional body during the current session, Mr. Laird said that more than \$5.3-billion in new equipment had been delivered to the South Vietnamese armed forces and that they were now "fully capable" of providing security against the North Vietnamese within the border of South Vietnam.

Mr. Laird said this made possible "the complete termination of American involvement in the war" even if peace talks failed. But he reiterated the Nixon Administration's position that ending the United States involvement was "contingent always

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on the safe return of American prisoners of war and an accounting for those missing in action throughout Indochina."

Mr. Laird declined to discuss the Paris talks on Vietnam during his three-hour appearance.

Presenting a 104-page report, part of which he read aloud, he summed up his four years in office. Mr. Laird, who steps down this month, is to be succeeded by Elliott R. Richardson, who has been Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

A majority of the committee members had words of praise for Mr. Laird but some criticized his handling of his post. Representative Robert L. Leggett, Democrat of California, told the Secretary: "Over-all, I would rate you a minus."

Mr. Laird said he was "deeply hurt" by Mr. Leggett's remarks.

Speaking only briefly of the recent intensive United States air raids on the Hanoi and Haiphong area, Mr. Laird said the attacks that began in mid-December were a return to the policy President Nixon announced on May 8 of bombing and mining North Vietnam until it agreed to negotiate an internationally supervised cease-fire, the release of prisoners of war and an accounting of missing Americans.

"When we determined negotiations were not going forward, the May 8 order was put back into effect," the Secretary added.

Mr. Laird declined to discuss the bombing in any detail at the open committee session. But he said that Adm. Thomas

H. Morer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would give the committee a detailed briefing in a closed session tomorrow.

In his report Mr. Laird said "the most impressive logistics story the past four years has been Vietnamization."

In a little more than three years, he said, Saigon's armed forces "increased in size by over 25 per cent," while the United States forces in South Vietnam were reduced from more than 540,000 men to fewer than 25,000.

Mr. Laird reported that during the withdrawal of American troops more than 2.4 million tons of material valued at more than \$6-billion was also shipped out of the country. More than \$1-billion worth of United States-built facilities was turned over to the South Vietnamese armed forces, he went on, and more than \$400-million in "usable property" and 614,000 tons of scrap have been disposed of in Vietnam.

5,000-Man Draft

Some American military personnel remain in Vietnam, he noted, and he said this was "in keeping with the Commander in Chief's pledge that all our forces will not be withdrawn until all prisoners have been released and our missing in action accounted for."

During three hours before the committee, Mr. Laird also predicted that there would be "a total draft call of about 5,000 for calendar year 1973, compared with 300,000 men" drafted in the last year of the Johnson Administration.

"I now estimate," he said, "that in March, fewer than

2,500 men will be drafted, and or the next quarter, which ends on July 1, no more than an average of 1,000 men per month will be needed."

Richard Helms, the outgoing Director of Central Intelligence, gave a briefing today to the Senate Armed Services Committee, which met in closed session.

Afterward Mr. Helms said the report had been his Annual "round the world" review, and added, "there's not much to suck out of it."

But Senator William B. Saxbe, Republican of Ohio, said Mr. Helms had provided "startling" information, although the Senator did not give details.

He did say however that the "prime thing" Mr. Helms had talked about was the North Vietnamese "ability to wage war." It's not much diminished," Mr. Saxbe added.

*More than \$5.3 billion worth of new military equipment has been delivered to Saigon in just over three years, plus \$1 billion worth of U.S. facilities, Laird said.

(Michael Getler, Wx Post 9 Jan '73.)