

U.S. Halts Removal of Viet Mines

Associated Press

Saigon

The United States has suspended minesweeping operations off North Vietnam in an effort to force a halt to fighting in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

It also halted economic talks with the North Vietnamese in Paris, and Secretary of State William P. Rogers said in Washington that unless Hanoi fully honors the Vietnam peace agreement, the Nixon administration will drop plans to ask Congress for reconstruction assistance in North Vietnam.

While Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim spoke of the Communist side's failure to respect the unilateral cease-fire declared by the government of Cambodia as one reason for the minesweeping suspension, reports from Phnom Penh told of continuing attacks by Communist-backed forces.

ROAD

A Phnom Penh dispatch said North Vietnamese-led troops again closed Highway 4, Phnom Penh's only link to the deepwater port of Kompong Som. The U.S. built road had been reopened only ten days ago.

Cambodian forces were reported to have suffered heavy casualties, with at least 20 dead, 30 wounded and an undisclosed number missing.

All of the major roadways from Phnom Penh have been cut by North Vietnamese and insurgent Cambodian forces in an apparent drive to strangle Phnom Penh and force the collapse of the government of President Lon Nol.

DISCLOSURE

The initial disclosure that the U.S. had halted the sweeping of mines came from the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry. A statement carried by Hanoi's official Vietnam News Agency said the action was taken unilaterally two days before and the U.S. task force had withdrawn from the coast.

Several hours later, Friedheim confirmed that the operation had been suspended "because of continued

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cease-fire violations by the other side and failure to abide by the agreements and assurances of Paris."

Friedheim's statement also cited the continued flow of supplies from North Vietnam into South Vietnam.

AGREE

The U.S. agreed in signing the Vietnam cease-fire agreement in Paris on January 27 to remove the mines. They were seeded in North Vietnamese waters last May in retaliation of a North Vietnamese troop incursion into South Vietnam across the demilitarized zone that separates the two Vietnams.

The North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry said the U.S. suspension is evidence of a "premeditated" plan to prolong the sea blockade of North Vietnam.

"The government of the United States has deliberately retarded this work and until this day it has exploded only three mines of the tens of thousands it was responsible for neutralizing," the Foreign Ministry said.

The statement added that the action coincided with what it termed a violent U.S. escalation of the war in Cambodia and renewed air strikes in Laos on Monday and Tuesday.

SAIGON

It accused the U.S. of encouraging the Saigon government to carry out tens of thousands of operations in South Vietnam against the Viet Cong.

All of these acts taken together, the statement said, "prove the U.S. government does not wish to finally end its military engagement in Indochina or renounce its plan to realize neocolonialism in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia."

It was the second time since the cease-fire took effect that the U.S. suspended the minesweeping operations. The first time was on February 28 when North Vietnam balked at releasing American prisoners of war on the scheduled date. That issue was resolved in less than a week.