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LAOS OPERATION A RESPONSE TO COMMUNIST AGGRESSION (1100)

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(UNDATED) -- SOUTH VIETNAM'S THRUST INTO SOUTHERN LAOS,
WITH U.S. AIR AND ARTILLERY SUPPORT, IS STRICTLY A SELF-DEFENSE
MANEUVER IN RESPONSE TO COMMUNIST AGGRESSION.

THE OPERATION IS AIMED AT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE SUPPLY AND
INFILTRATION NETWORK ALONG THE SO-CALLED HO CHI MINH TRAIL IN THE
LAO PANHANDLE. IT IS DESIGNED TO ENHANCE THE FUTURE SECURITY OF
ALLIED FORCES IN INDOCHINA AND TO HASTEN THE RESTORATION OF
PEACE THROUGHOUT THE AREA.

BY MOVING AGAINST COMMUNIST BASES ILLEGALLY SET UP IN LAOS --
AN ESTIMATED 80,000 TROOPS FROM NORTH VIETNAM ARE IN LAOS --

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SAIGON HOPES TO BLUNT HANOI'S POTENTIAL FOR AGGRESSION NOT ONLY IN SOUTH VIETNAM BUT IN CAMBODIA AS WELL.

THE USE OF AMERICAN AIRCRAFT AND ARTILLERY IN SUPPORT OF THE STRIKE IS CONSISTENT WITH U.S. POLICY OF HELPING ITS ALLIES TO DEFEND THEMSELVES AGAINST COMMUNIST AGGRESSION.

NO AMERICAN GROUND COMBAT TROOPS CROSSED THE SOUTH VIETNAM-LAOS BORDER, AND NONE WILL DO SO.

WHILE FULLY ENDORSING THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE THRUST, THE UNITED STATES CONTINUES TO HOPE THAT THE COMMUNISTS WILL RECOGNIZE THE FUTILITY OF THEIR AGGRESSION AND ENTER INTO SERIOUS NEGOTIATIONS TO END THE WAR.

THESE WERE SOME OF THE MAJOR POINTS STRESSED BY THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH VIETNAM FEBRUARY 8 AS THE LAO CAMPAIGN GOT UNDER WAY. IN OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

-- A NUMBER OF FOREIGN LEADERS AND GOVERNMENTS EXPRESSED APPROVAL OF THE OPERATION, OTHERS, INCLUDING U.N. SECRETARY GENERAL U THANT, WERE CRITICAL.

-- SIMILARLY, BOTH APPROVAL AND DISAPPROVAL WERE VOICED BY U.S. CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS.

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PRESIDENT THIEU OF SOUTH VIETNAM, IN A MESSAGE TO HIS PEOPLE, SAID THE OPERATION IS "LIMITED IN TIME AS WELL AS IN SPACE..." HE DID NOT ELABORATE.

"THIS IS NOT AN ACT OF AGGRESSION...AGAINST THE FRIENDLY NATION OF LAOS," PRESIDENT THIEU SAID; "ON THE CONTRARY, THIS CONSTITUTES AN ACT DESIGNED TO STOP THE COMMUNIST NORTH VIETNAMESE FROM EXPANDING AND MAINTAINING THEIR AGGRESSION POTENTIAL."

IF THE COMMUNISTS ARE PERMITTED TO BUILD UP THEIR MILITARY RESOURCES IN THE LAO PANHANDLE, MR. THIEU SAID, THEY "WILL STUBBORNLY CONTINUE THEIR WAR OF AGGRESSION THROUGHOUT VIETNAM, LAOS AND THE KHMER REPUBLIC (CAMBODIA)."

LAST WEEK U.S. DEFENSE OFFICIALS ESTIMATED THAT THERE WERE 50,000 NORTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS IN THE LAO PANHANDLE, PLUS ABOUT 20,000 IN THE NORTHERNMOST AREAS OF SOUTH VIETNAM.

U.S. PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY RONALD ZIEGLER STRESSED THE LIMITED SCOPE OF THE OPERATION, SAYING THE USE OF AMERICAN AIR POWER IS CONSISTENT WITH PRESIDENT NIXON'S POLICY OF PROTECTING U.S. FORCES FROM POTENTIAL THREATS AS THEY WITHDRAW FROM SOUTH VIETNAM.

THE LAO PANHANDLE, HE SAID, HAS FOR "QUITE SOME TIME" BEEN THE SCENE OF HEAVY NORTH VIETNAMESE ACTIVITY. NORTH VIETNAMESE SOLDIERS IN EFFECT OCCUPY THE AREA, AND THE PANHANDLE IS THE SITE OF MASSIVE SUPPLY DUMPS AND MAJOR INFILTRATION ROUTES INTO SOUTH VIETNAM, HE SAID.

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THE ACTIVITIES OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE, HE ADDED, MAKE THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE OPERATION "CONSISTENT WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW" AND SPECIFICALLY WITH ARTICLE 51 OF THE U.N. CHARTER.

UPHOLDING THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFENSE, HE NOTED THAT THE ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENT AND PREMIER SOUVANNA PHOUMA BOTH HAD REFERRED TO THE FACT THAT THE PANHANDLE AREA IS OCCUPIED BY THE NORTH VIETNAMESE, AND THAT THE LAO GOVERNMENT EXERCISED NO CONTROL THERE.

THE 1962 GENEVA ACCORDS -- SIGNED BY NORTH VIETNAM, COMMUNIST CHINA, THE SOVIET UNION AND THE UNITED STATES, AMONG OTHERS -- WERE AIMED AT GUARANTEEING THE NEUTRALITY OF LAOS. NONETHELESS, MR. ZIEGLER POINTED OUT, THE NORTH VIETNAMESE HAVE CREATED INFILTRATION AND SUPPLY ROUTES THROUGH LAOS INTO CAMBODIA AND SOUTH VIETNAM.

A DETERMINATION BY THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY COMMAND AND THE U.S. COMMANDER, GENERAL CREIGHTON ABRAMS, THAT "MASSIVE" AMOUNTS OF MATERIEL AND TROOPS WERE BEING FUNNELED INTO

THE PANHANDLE PRECEDED THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE DECISION TO MOUNT A LIMITED OPERATION THERE, MR. ZIEGLER NOTED.

MR. NIXON WAS INVOLVED IN THAT DECISION, HE ADDED, BECAUSE THE PRESIDENT HAS RESERVED THE RIGHT TO DECIDE ON THE USE OF AMERICAN AIR POWER AND LOGISTICS SUPPORT IN INDOCHINA. HE IS ALLOWING USE OF AMERICAN AIR POWER TO SUPPLEMENT THAT OF THE ARMY OF SOUTH VIETNAM (ARVN), MR. ZIEGLER SAID, BECAUSE THE ARVN OPERATION IS AIMED AT "DEALING WITH THE SUPPLY BUILDUP IN THE SANCTUARIES AND AT DISRUPTING SUPPLY LINES" INTO SOUTH VIETNAM.

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THOSE SUPPLIES AND THOSE TROOPS COULD THREATEN THE REMAINING AMERICAN FORCES IN SOUTH VIETNAM ONCE THEY HAD MADE THEIR WAY FROM LAOS INTO THE ADJOINING NORTHERN SECTION OF SOUTH VIETNAM.

SINCE MR. NIXON TOOK OFFICE TWO YEARS AGO, THE LEVEL OF U.S. FORCES HAS DECLINED STEADILY FROM 534,000 MEN AND IS TO REACH 284,000 BY MAY 1. MR. NIXON WILL ANNOUNCE A FURTHER REDUCTION -- BEYOND THE 284,000-LEVEL -- SOMETIME IN APRIL.

THE PRESIDENT HAS MADE CLEAR, MR. ZIEGLER SAID, THAT HE REGARDS PROGRESS AT THE PARIS PEACE TALKS AS THE FASTEST WAY OF SETTLING THE VIETNAM CONFLICT.

HOWEVER, IN THE ABSENCE OF SUCH PROGRESS, MR. ZIEGLER SAID THE VIETNAMIZATION PROGRAM -- TRAINING AND RE-EQUIPPING ARVN TO REPLACE AMERICAN TROOPS -- WILL CONTINUE.

"WE ARE WITHDRAWING FORCES," MR. ZIEGLER SAID. "WE ARE REDUCING U.S. INVOLVEMENT. WE ARE REDUCING USE OF AMERICAN AIR POWER OVER INDOCHINA."

WHILE MR. NIXON HAS BEEN REDUCING THE AMERICAN ROLE IN THE VIETNAM CONFLICT, MR. ZIEGLER NOTED, HANOI HAS IGNORED THE COMPREHENSIVE PEACE INITIATIVE THE PRESIDENT OFFERED LAST OCTOBER.

THE STATE DEPARTMENT, IN A STATEMENT, ALSO NOTED THAT THE UNITED STATES "HAS CONSISTENTLY SOUGHT TO END THE CONFLICT IN INDOCHINA THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS," ADDING THAT PRESIDENT NIXON IN HIS OCTOBER INITIATIVE SPECIFICALLY PROPOSED:

"(A) A CEASEFIRE THROUGHOUT INDOCHINA, (B) A NEGOTIATED TIMETABLE FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF ALL FORCES, (C) IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF ALL PRISONERS OF WAR, (D) AN INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE FOR ALL OF INDOCHINA, AND (E) A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT."

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THE PANHANDLE TERRITORY INVOLVED IN THE ARVN OPERATION HAS BEEN THE SCENE OF COMBAT SINCE 1965," THE STATE DEPARTMENT STATEMENT SAID.

IT NOTED THAT "THE PRINCIPAL NEW FACTOR IS THAT SOUTH VIETNAM FORCES WILL MOVE AGAINST THE ENEMY ON THE GROUND TO DENY HIM THE SANCTUARIES AND DISRUPT THE MAIN ARTERY OF SUPPLIES WHICH HE HAS BEEN ABLE TO USE SO EFFECTIVELY AGAINST AMERICAN AND SOUTH VIETNAMESE FORCES IN THE PAST."

LATER, STATE DEPARTMENT SPOKESMAN ROBERT J. MCCLOSKEY TOLD REPORTERS IT WAS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THE DEPARTMENT'S STATEMENT HAD EMPHASIZED PRESIDENT NIXON'S PROPOSAL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL PEACE CONFERENCE FOR ALL OF INDOCHINA.

ZWE RESTATED, "THE PRESIDENT'S PROPOSAL "AGAIN TODAY, AND I PUT SOME EMPHASIS ON THAT," MR. MCCLOSKEY SAID.

"I AM NOT IN A POSITION OF PERMITTING YOU (NEWSMEN) TO CONCLUDE," MR. MCCLOSKEY TOLD A NEWS BRIEFING, THAT "WE ARE OF A MIND" THAT THE 1962 GENEVA AGREEMENTS ON LAOS "ARE NULL AND VOID."

HE POINTED OUT THAT NORTH VIETNAM HAD VIOLATED THE 1962 ACCORDS FROM THE DAY THEY WERE SIGNED, BECAUSE THE ACCORDS CALLED FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF ALL FOREIGN FORCES FROM LAOS.

THE STATE DEPARTMENT SPOKESMAN RECALLED THAT PRESIDENT NIXON LAST MARCH ASKED BRITISH PRIME MINISTER HAROLD WILSON AND

SOVIET PREMIER ALEXEI KOSYGIN TO HELP RESTORE NEUTRALITY IN LAOS
ACCORDING TO THE PROVISIONS OF THE 1962 GENEVA ACCORD.

BRITAIN AND THE SOVIET UNION ARE CO-CHAIRMEN OF THE GENEVA
CONFERENCE ON LAOS.

"WE WOULD WISH TO SEE," MR. MCCLOSKEY SAID, "A RETURN TO THOSE
AGREEMENTS WHICH WOULD RESTORE SERENITY AND TRUE NEUTRALITY
TO LAOS." ITEM

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