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FEBRUARY 10, 1971

LAIRD STATEMENT TO ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEES (EXCERPTS)

WASHINGTON -- FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS OF A STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE MELVIN R. LAIRD BEFORE THE SENATE AND HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEES FEBRUARY 9:

(BEGIN EXCERPTS)

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

TWO WEEKS AGO I APPEARED BEFORE CONGRESS TO REPORT ON MY RECENT TRIP TO PARIS, BANGKOK, SAIGON, AND PACIFIC COMMAND HEAD-QUARTERS IN HONOLULU AND TO GIVE YOU A GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF VIETNAMIZATION PROGRESS AND THE OVERALL SITUATION IN INDOCHINA.

I REPORTED AT THAT TIME THAT OUR INITIAL GOALS IN INDOCHINA HAD NOT CHANGED AND THAT THESE GOALS, IN ESSENCE, WERE AND REMAIN THE FOLLOWING:

- TO REDUCE AMERICAN CASUALTIES.
- TO BEGIN AND CONTINUE THE WITHDRAWAL OF AMERICANS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA.
- TO ACCELERATE VIETNAMIZATION PROGRESS.
- TO IMPLEMENT THE NIXON DOCTRINE IN ASIA.
- AND TO MAINTAIN OUR OBLIGATIONS AND OUR INTERESTS IN ASIA AS WE MOVE TOWARD PRESIDENT NIXON'S GOAL OF A GENERATION OF PEACE.

I ALSO REPORTED THAT BY ANY MEASUREMENT OF OUR OVERALL ACTIVITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA SINCE THE START OF VIETNAMIZATION, THE THRUST OF AMERICAN ACTIVITY HAS BEEN DOWNWARD.

AMERICAN COMBAT DEATHS ARE DOWN FROM PEAKS AS HIGH AS 500 A WEEK IN 1968 TO AVERAGES BELOW 50 A WEEK. I WOULD REPEAT THAT AS SECRETARY OF DEFENSE I CANNOT AND WILL NOT BE SATISFIED UNTIL THERE ARE NO AMERICAN COMBAT CASUALTIES. I KNOW THAT EACH MEMBER OF THIS COMMITTEE SHARES THESE SENTIMENTS.

AMERICAN AIR ATTACK SORTIES IN INDOCHINA DURING 1970 WERE DOWN MORE THAN 50 PER CENT FROM PEAK 1968 LEVELS, AND FURTHER CUTS ARE PLANNED FOR 1971.

BY MAY, AMERICAN TROOP STRENGTH IN VIETNAM WILL HAVE BEEN REDUCED TO ALMOST HALF THE AUTHORIZED TROOP STRENGTH AT THE TIME I BECAME SECRETARY OF DEFENSE. AS YOU KNOW, BY THIS SUMMER WE WILL HAVE COMPLETED PHASE I OF VIETNAMIZATION IN WHICH THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR GROUND COMBAT OPERATIONS WILL HAVE BEEN TURNED OVER TO THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE.

AMERICAN BUDGET COSTS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA WERE ALSO CUT APPROXIMATELY IN HALF FROM PEAK WAR COSTS IN 1968. IN SHORT, EVERYTHING WE HAVE DONE SINCE THE START OF VIETNAMIZATION HAS BEEN AIMED AT REVERSING THE PROCESS OF EVER-INCREASING AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

WHEN VIETNAMIZATION BEGAN, MR. CHAIRMAN, THE ENEMY ENJOYED UNHINDERED ACCESS TO NUMEROUS SANCTUARIES ALONG THE VIETNAMESE BORDER BOTH IN LAOS AND IN CAMBODIA. THE SANCTUARIES GAVE THE ENEMY A "TOLL-FREE-ROAD" FROM WHICH THEY INFLICTED HEAVY CASUALTIES ON AMERICAN AND SOUTH VIETNAMESE FORCES AND THE CIVILIAN POPULATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM.

THE VIETNAMIZATION PROGRAM WAS BASED ON THE EXPECTATION THAT THESE SANCTUARIES MIGHT CONTINUE TO BE AVAILABLE TO THE ENEMY FOR SEVERAL YEARS INTO THE FUTURE. OUR EFFORTS TO HELP SOUTH VIETNAM IMPROVE ITS ARMED FORCES WERE INITIALLY BASED ON THAT ASSUMPTION. WHEN THE SITUATION IN CAMBODIA SUDDENLY CHANGED LAST YEAR, THE NEW GOVERNMENT IN PHNOM PENH WAS DETERMINED AND ABLE TO BEGIN MILITARY ACTIVITIES AGAINST THE NORTH VIETNAMESE INVADERS WHO HAD FOR SO LONG OCCUPIED AND CONTROLLED THE SANCTUARY AREAS ASTRIDE THE BORDER BETWEEN SOUTH VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA. AS A RESULT OF SIGNIFICANT

PROGRESS IN VIETNAMIZATION IN THE PREVIOUS MONTHS, THE ARVN WAS IN A POSITION LAST APRIL, WITH U.S. ASSISTANCE, TO MOVE IN AND DISRUPT THE SANCTUARIES IN CAMBODIA. THE RESULTS OF THAT OPERATION EXCEEDED OUR EXPECTATIONS AND PERMITTED MORE RAPID PROGRESS IN VIETNAMIZATION THAN WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE BEEN THE CASE.

AS A RESULT, THE LEVEL OF ENEMY ACTIVITY IN MILITARY REGIONS 3 AND 4 OF SOUTH VIETNAM HAS BEEN GREATLY REDUCED, SIGNIFICANT ADDITIONAL PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE IN VIETNAMIZATION AND THE VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES HAVE GAINED GREATLY IN CONFIDENCE AND OPERATIONAL CAPABILITY. IN ADDITION, THE LEVEL OF AMERICAN CASUALTIES HAS BEEN GREATLY REDUCED AS WE CONTINUE TO BRING HOME THOUSANDS MORE AMERICANS.

I WANT TO REPEAT WHAT I HAVE TOLD THIS COMMITTEE AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE MANY TIMES BEFORE THAT WE CANNOT EXPECT THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE TO WIN EVERY BATTLE IN WHICH THEY BECOME ENGAGED. THERE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BE SOME SETBACKS AS VIETNAMIZATION PROGRESSES.

WHEN I WAS IN SAIGON LAST MONTH, I CONFERRED AT LENGTH WITH PRESIDENT THIEU, AMBASSADOR BUNKER, GENERAL ABRAMS, AND OTHERS ABOUT THE SITUATION FACING ALLIED FORCES IN THE CURRENT DRY SEASON. WE AGREED THAT THE MILITARY ASPECTS OF VIETNAMIZATION HAD PROGRESSED SO WELL THAT THE ARMED FORCES OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM (ARVN) NOW WERE CAPABLE OF CONDUCTING MULTI-CORPS OPERATIONS AGAINST ENEMY-OCCUPIED SANCTUARIES ALONG THE BORDERS OF SOUTH VIETNAM, WITHOUT U.S. GROUND FORCES OR U.S. ADVISORS.

OUR ASSESSMENT MADE CLEAR THE FACT THAT, AS A RESULT OF THE ADVANTAGES GAINED FOLLOWING LAST YEAR'S CAMBODIAN OPERATIONS, THE ENEMY WAS NOW BEING FORCED TO PLACE MUCH GREATER RELIANCE ON THE "HO CHI MINH TRAIL" AND ITS RELATED SANCTUARY AREAS IN SOUTHERN LAOS. IN OUR DISCUSSIONS, AMBASSADOR BUNKER, GENERAL ABRAMS, AND I AGREED WITH PRESIDENT THIEU AND OTHER SOUTH VIETNAMESE LEADERS THAT OPERATIONS AGAINST SANCTUARIES IN THE SOUTHERN LAOTIAN PANHANDLE WOULD CONTRIBUTE, FROM THEIR POINT OF VIEW, TO THE SECURITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH VIETNAM, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, FROM OUR POINT OF

VIEW, WOULD SAVE ADDITIONAL AMERICAN LIVES AND ENHANCE THE SECURITY OF THE REMAINING U.S. FORCES INSIDE SOUTH VIETNAM AND SET THE STAGE FOR BRINGING HOME ADDITIONAL THOUSANDS OF AMERICANS IN COMING MONTHS.

UPON MY RETURN I REPORTED THIS TO THE PRESIDENT. IT WAS THE UNANIMOUS CONCLUSION OF THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF, THE SECRETARY OF STATE, AND MYSELF THAT WE SHOULD USE WHATEVER AIR POWER IS NECESSARY TO ASSIST THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE IN THEIR GROUND OPERATIONS AGAINST SANCTUARY AREAS IN BOTH CAMBODIA AND LAOS, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME PRECLUDING THE USE OF AMERICAN GROUND COMBAT TROOPS OR ADVISORS IN THESE OPERATIONS.

WITH REGARD TO THE CURRENT OPERATIONS, MR. CHAIRMAN, PRESIDENT THIEU HAS STATED THAT OPERATION LAMSON 719 - THE LAOTIAN SANCTUARY OPERATIONS-- IS LIMITED IN TIME AS WELL AS IN SPACE. THE OBJECTIVE OF LAMSON 719 IS TO DISRUPT THE SUPPLY AND INFILTRATIONS NETWORK OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE INSIDE SOUTHERN LAOS WHICH FOR MANY YEARS HAS BEEN OCCUPIED BY THE COMMUNISTS AND USED TO LAUNCH ATTACKS AGAINST THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM.

IN A MESSAGE TO HIS PEOPLE, PRESIDENT THIEU RECALLED THAT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE HAD OPENLY VIOLATED THE NEUTRALITY AND THE TERRITORY OF LAOS AND BLATANTLY VIOLATED THE 1962 GENEVA AGREEMENT. HE MADE IT CLEAR THAT THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM HAD NO TERRITORIAL AMBITIONS WHATSOEVER WITH REGARD TO LAOS AND THAT SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES WOULD WITHDRAW FROM LAOTIAN TERRITORY UPON COMPLETION OF THESE OPERATIONS.

PRESIDENT THIEU STATED:

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

THE U.S. COMMAND IN SAIGON POINTED OUT AFTER PRESIDENT THIEU MADE HIS STATEMENT THAT NO U.S. GROUND COMBAT FORCES OR ADVISORS WOULD BE INVOLVED. THE U.S. COMMAND STATED MOST FIRMLY THAT THE

U.S. WOULD PROVIDE WHATEVER AIR POWER IS REQUIRED TO SUPPLEMENT THE CAPABILITIES OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE AIR FORCE. THIS AIR POWER WILL INCLUDE AIR COMBAT, AIR LOGISTICS, AND MEDICAL EVACUATION SORTIES -- BOTH FIXED WING AND HELICOPTER.

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AND THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAVE SUBSEQUENTLY DISCUSSED THE OPERATION, POINTING OUT THAT OUR AIR SUPPORT IS BEING USED BECAUSE IT CONTRIBUTES TO THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF AMERICAN MILITARY MEN IN SOUTH VIETNAM AS VIETNAMIZATION CONTINUES AND AS WE CONTINUE TO WITHDRAW ADDITIONAL FORCES FROM VIETNAM.

I WOULD POINT OUT, MR. CHAIRMAN, THAT THERE ARE A TOTAL OF SOME 10,000 AMERICAN GROUND FORCES INVOLVED WITHIN SOUTH VIETNAM IN CONNECTION WITH THE TWO CURRENT SOUTH VIETNAMESE OPERATIONS IN CAMBODIAN AND LAOTIAN SANCTUARIES. UNDER THE PRESIDENT'S ANNOUNCED PROGRAM, MORE THAN FIVE TIMES THIS NUMBER OF AMERICANS WILL BE BROUGHT HOME WITHIN THE NEXT 90 DAYS.

MR. CHAIRMAN, THE PRESIDENT HAS INDICATED HE WILL HAVE AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF FURTHER TROOP WITHDRAWALS TO FOLLOW THE MAY 1 LEVEL OF 284,000 SOMETIME IN APRIL. I WISH TO ASSURE THIS COMMITTEE THAT WE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE WILL -- AS WE HAVE IN EVERY PREVIOUS INSTANCE -- MEET OR BEAT THE MAY 1 TROOP CEILING AND ANY FUTURE TROOP REDUCTION GOAL THE PRESIDENT ESTABLISHES IN APRIL.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, MR. CHAIRMAN, BOTH WE AND THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM, WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO ACHIEVE A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT IN PARIS. BUT UNTIL SUCH TIME AS THE OTHER SIDE IS WILLING TO JOIN IN MEANINGFUL NEGOTIATIONS, WE WILL PRESS FORWARD WITH VIETNAMIZATION IN THE SAFEST AND MOST EFFECTIVE WAY POSSIBLE.
(END TEXT)