

# U.S. Halts Plane Pullout In Thailand

By Bruce Palling

Special to The Washington Post

BANGKOK, May 6—The U.S. embassy here agreed today to a "temporary suspension" of the withdrawal of American-supplied aircraft flown into Thailand last week by fleeing south Vietnamese pilots.

The agreement follows the removal of all of the more sophisticated jet fighters and cargo planes in the past two days to the carrier Midway in the Gulf of Siam and to Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

The U.S. embassy here has refused to disclose any details of the plane withdrawal even though the Pentagon announced the move yesterday in Washington.

Newsmen on a press tour of the Utapao Air Base today saw about 40 to 50 aircraft on the base which had presumably come from South Vietnam.

Sources on the base said that about 20 aircraft were carried from Utapao to the Midway by giant helicopters Sunday and Monday. At least two aircraft were reported seriously damaged when they fell from the helicopters—one on the Utapao runway and one on the Midway.

The aircraft already removed include F-5 jet fighters, A-37 jet fighter-bombers and also C-130 cargo planes which were reported to have been flown direct to the Philippines.

The Thai government's request for a suspension followed contradictory statements by various members of the Cabinet, with some declaring that the affair was solely an American problem while others considered that the aircraft should be held by Thailand until the government decided their fate.

Hanoi radio has claimed

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that the aircraft are the property of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam and warned Thailand that any hesitancy about returning the planes could jeopardize relations between the two Vietnams and Thailand.

Thai Foreign Minister, Chatichai Choonhavan called the acting American ambassador, Edward Masters, in for a 25-minute talk on the matter today. Masters refused to answer any questions after the meeting.

Observers here consider it impossible that Thai military authorities did not know that the United States

was taking the planes out of Thailand.

However, the armed forces are considered opposed to giving the aircraft to the Provisional Revolutionary Government. They are known to view the two Vietnams as posing the greatest military threat to Thailand. Additionally, the military leaders would be extremely reluctant to commit any hostile act towards the United States out of concern that U.S. military assistance program to Thailand be maintained at a high level.

Cynics say that the present situation is the best possible one for Thailand, with all of the sophisticated aircraft already gone and the Thai government now taking a "tough stand" to give the impression of surprise and anger at the unilateral

action taken by the Americans.

There are, however, government officials who are genuinely angry at the United States for taking such action apparently without formal consultation.

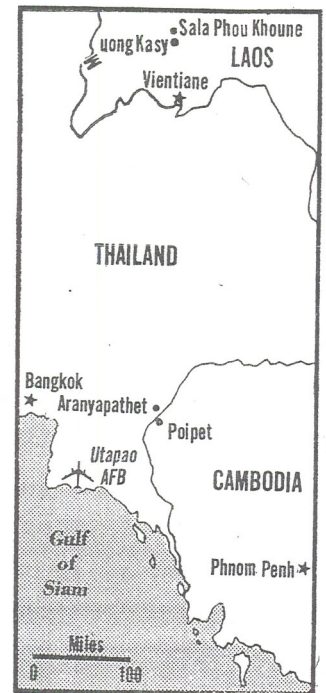
To avoid the risky move of returning the other aircraft to South Vietnam, Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj said the remaining aircraft will stay in Thai custody until peace and order have returned to South Vietnam and the ownership question can be determined.

Foreign Minister Chatichai has also asked to see the United States and South Vietnamese agreement on military aid, saying that if there is an agreement about

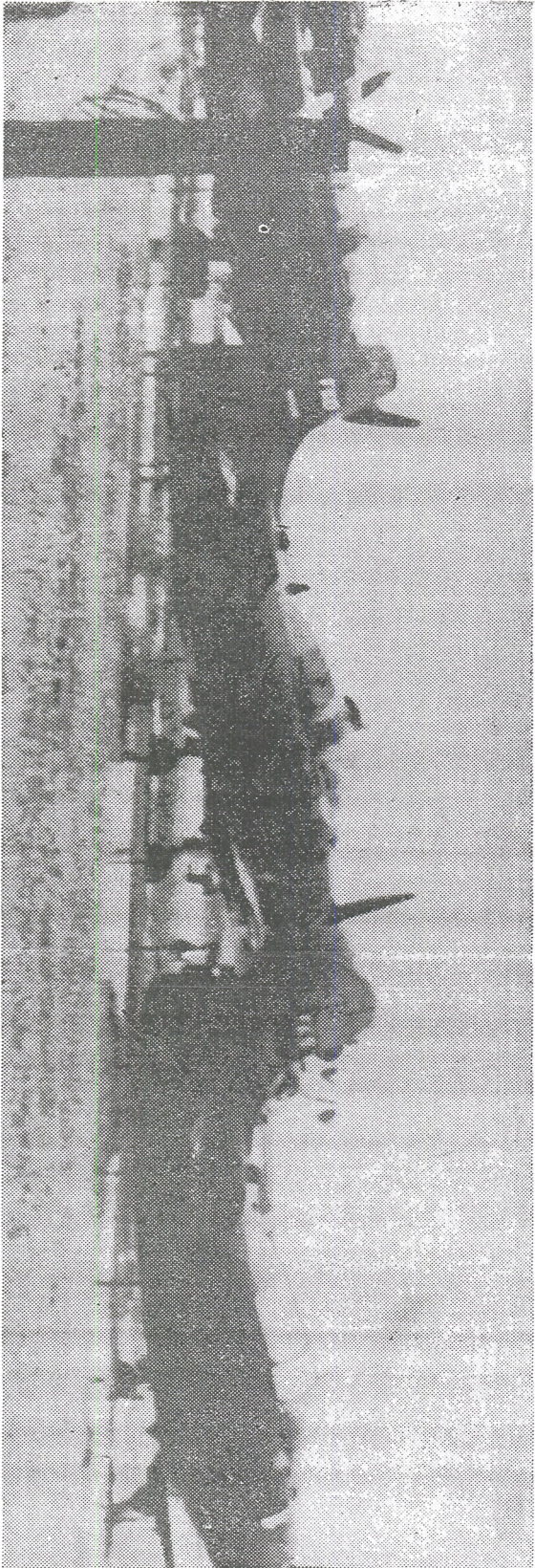
the title reverting to the United States Thailand would not interfere. Chatichai also requested that a delegation from the Provisional Revolutionary Government come to Bangkok to negotiate the return of the aircraft and other military supplies brought in by fleeing Saigon government forces.

Such contradictory statements highlight the dilemma in which the Thai government now finds itself, in its efforts to be accommodating to both sides.

[Foreign Ministry sources said today that a five-member North Korean delegation will fly to Bangkok Wednesday for talks on establishing diplomatic relations, AFP reported from Bangkok.]



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo  
—The Washington Post



United Press International  
South Vietnamese fighter planes without markings parked at Utapao Air Base in Thailand. Communist government in Saigon has claimed them.