

U.S. Airlifting
Marines to Thailand
Site Near

Seized Freighter

Ford Insists Cambodians Release Ship

By Michael Getler
and Carroll Kilpatrick
Washington Post Staff Writers

The United States has begun airlifting Marines from bases in the Philippines and Okinawa to Thailand for a possible military showdown that could come within the next 24 hours over the seizure Monday of an unarmed American merchant ship by Cambodian gunboats.

By this morning, sources said the United States would probably have flown hundreds of Marines on Air Force C-141 transports into the big Utapao airbase in Thailand.

Air Force helicopters—capable of carrying battle-equipped Marines—were being relocated in Thailand, it was understood, putting them within a one-hour or two-hour flight of the tiny island in the Gulf of Siam near which the merchant ship Mayaguez was lying dead in the water late yesterday.

At a White House briefing yesterday, press secretary Ron Nessen was asked if President Ford had set a deadline or issued an ultimatum for release of the vessel and its 39-man American crew.

"If you are asking if he has set a definite minute or hour for the release of the ship," Nessen replied, "the answer is no."

Nonetheless Nessen stressed that the President was demanding that the Mayaguez be freed immediately.

"Immediate is immediate,"

Nessen said. "The President wants the ship released now."

While attempts to free the vessel through diplomatic contacts with third countries, including China, continue, the United States is moving into place a military force which—by sometime today—will give the administration the ability to take military action to recapture the vessel if the President decides to use force. One senior administration official summed up the situation with the question: "Do you scare the hell out of them or kick the hell out of them?"

Earlier the United States had very little usable military power in the immediate vicinity with the exception of military reconnaissance planes, AC-130 gunships and jet fighter-bombers that have

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kept a continuous watch over the area.

Aside from the Marines, by this morning at least one and possibly more Navy destroyers are expected to reach the area as lead elements of a larger task force that includes the aircraft carrier Coral Sea, which is expected to be within range of the area later today.

If the vessel is not released soon, Mr. Ford faces a tough decision since the use of force could endanger the safety of the American crew. The administration has ruled out any deal for return of the ship. Reporters traveling with Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger learned yesterday that the Cambodians will not be given anything in exchange for the ship.

Sources say there are indications, based on reports from reconnaissance pilots swooping low over the ship and island in the face of small arms fire, which hit the wing of one jet, that many if not all of the crew members have been taken off the ship and moved by two small boats to the island.

Sources stress that almost all information on exactly what is happening on the scene is sketchy.

There were also reports that the Mayaguez, which was lying motionless near the island of Koh Tang about 30 miles south of the Cambodian port

of Kompong Som, had begun to move.

Informed sources, however, said the merchant ship — as

of late yesterday afternoon Washington time — did not appear to be leaving but there were indications that another vessel—possibly a gunboat — was departing.

Information apparently based on sensors aboard U.S. reconnaissance planes indicated that the Mayaguez's smoke stack had cooled down, indicating that its departure was not imminent.

When the ship was first fired upon and boarded some 60 miles off the Cambodian coast the assumption in the White House was that the vessel was to be taken into Kompong Som. Mr. Ford's initial announcement even stated that the vessel had already been forced into that port.

As it turned out, however, the Cambodians only took the ship to the tiny rock island.

U.S. officials are puzzled why the Cambodians didn't take the ship all the way to port initially, and view that decision as the only encouraging sign that the vessel may be released without a fight.

The failure to take it into Kompong Som also produced an immediate shift in U.S. military strategy. If the ship had reached port, the chances of getting the vessel back or saving the crew from being transported inland would have diminished fast.

With the vessel and crew, as of yesterday, still offshore, the administration now seems intent on assuring that the vessel does not reach port and is moving military forces into position where they could stop it and, it is hoped, rescue the crew.

Informants say there are no accurate estimates of the size of the force guarding the ship or the island, or whether reinforcements are being sent.

There also is still apparently no hard identification of the captors as Cambodians, though no one in the administration seems to doubt that they are Khmer Rouge forces. The Cambodian radio has made no mention of the Mayaguez incident.

At the Pentagon yesterday, spokesmen were asked about reports that several foreign vessels in recent days had been intercepted by Cambodian gunboats in the same general area and why these incidents failed to produce a warning to U.S. mariners.

The White House said Monday that a Panamanian ship had been detained May 7 by the Cambodians and it was also disclosed that a South Korean freighter had been fired upon but fled from captors on May 4. A Thai fishing boat was also seized in the area last week.

U.S. officials said only that word travels slowly among commercial shipping companies. However, the South Korean Transportation Ministry put out a warning to ships in the area immediately after its vessel was challenged. The Pentagon after the Mayaguez was captured and more than a week after the other incidents, yesterday issued a warning to mariners.

The White House has said it has no information that any of the Mayaguez crewmen have been injured.

A U.S. Navy P-3 patrol plane,

the first U.S. craft on the scene yesterday morning was hit by small-arms fire from the island, but the plane was not disabled.

During most of yesterday, the Ford administration clamped a tight lid on information about what was going on, in part because of two National Security Council meetings.

Late last night Mr. Ford called the second National Security Council meeting of the day. Mr. Ford met with Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger, Kissinger, CIA Director William E. Colby and other council members.

There was no general agreement on what military course to follow if peaceful efforts to win the ship's release failed.

None of the military options are viewed as very attractive by military men in terms of assuring the safety of the crew.

Further adding to the sensitivity of the issue was a statement in Bangkok by Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj of Thailand that his country would not permit the United States to use Thai bases for military action against Cambodia, including any armed attempt to recapture the Mayaguez.

The political situation with Thailand, increasingly worried about its relations with a new Communist-led Cambodia, made the entire situation "hyper-delicate" in the words of one defense official.

Yet, U.S. F-4, F-111 and A-7 fighter-bombers from Thai bases were already circling the captured ship and marines were being flown to Utopao.

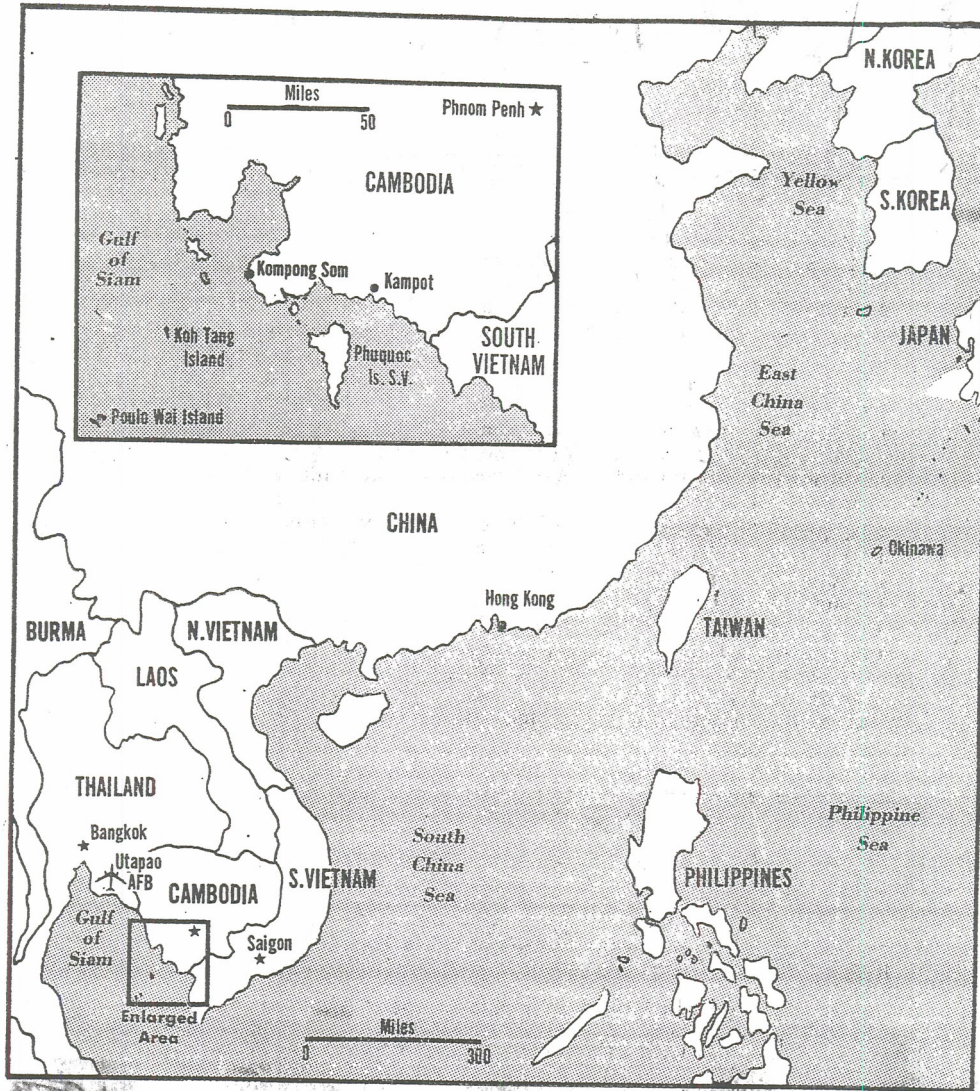
Later in the day, however, after reports that the United

States had alerted U.S. Marines for movement to Thailand reached Bangkok, a Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman, according to the Associated Press, said: "We will have to wait for complete details before we can make any comments."

At the White House news briefing Nessen was questioned at length about possible U.S. military action. Nessen indicated that no final decision had been made but added that Mr. Ford "would consult with the Congress" before taking action.

The President warned Monday of "serious consequences" for what he called an "act of piracy" in seizing the Mayaguez "on the high seas" in international waters, some 60 miles from the Cambodian coastline. However, the presence of the ship roughly 8 miles off the tiny and disputed island of Poulo Wai at the time it was seized, raises a potential question because Cambodia claims 12-mile territorial waters.

U.S. officials, and Sea-Land Corp., the ship's owners, insist the Mayaguez was in international waters and view it as absurd to consider being within 12 miles of a tiny "rock pile" as a violation of territorial waters.



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Inset shows Koh Tang Island, where American merchant ship is being held.