

U.S. May Give Saigon New Light Planes

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 —

The Nixon Administration is considering providing South Vietnam with a new force of light armed aircraft to better equip it to take over the job of attacking supplies and troops moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

The United States now performs nearly all of this task with B-52 bombers, F-4 fighter-bombers and AC-130 gunships.

But Pentagon sources say that tests will soon get under way, both in the United States and in Southeast Asia, to determine whether armed versions of two light turboprop aircraft can provide South Vietnam with a significant anti-infiltration capability of its own.

"We're not deluding ourselves that even a substantial number of these new planes will provide Saigon with anything like the present interdiction effort along the trail," one Pentagon official said.

"But when coupled with small, harassing raid by ground troops, plus attacks from some of the other planes and helicopters in its air force, the new planes should give South Vietnam a meaningful capability to prevent North Vietnam from having a free ride into the war zone."

Administration planners say that no firm decision has yet been made on when the American bombing campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex will be ended. "We certainly don't intend to do it indefinitely," one senior officer said.

The best estimate is that the attacks will be reduced gradually and ended sometime in 1972 or 1973.

Contract Is Disclosed

Planners suggest that even after Saigon has taken over responsibility for the campaign, the United States will probably continue to maintain fighter-bombers both in Thailand and on aircraft carriers off the Vietnamese coast to deter Hanoi either from attempting an invasion in strength or from employing its aircraft against targets in South Vietnam.

In a one-sentence announcement Tuesday, the Pentagon disclosed that Fairchild Industries of Germantown, Md., had been awarded a \$3,771,536 contract for 15 armed, short take-off and landing aircraft, and Helio Aircraft Corporation of Bedford, Mass., a \$3,398-750 contract for 15 similar planes.

The planes, it is reported, will be equipped with three-barrel 20 mm. rapid-fire Gatling guns, 2.75-inch rockets, special night vision devices and some new types of bombs.

The initial test, by American

crews, will take place at Elgin Air Force Base in Florida. In the spring, the tests will be conducted over the Ho Chi Minh Trail itself, Pentagon sources said. Both American and Vietnamese pilots will participate in the combat tests.

These are expected to take about 60 days, after which a decision may be made on whether to buy large numbers of the Fairchild or Helio planes for the South Vietnamese. Successful tests could lead to the purchase of 100 or more aircraft, one official said. Planners explained that one of the factors limiting the number and type of aircraft that could be provided Saigon was the time required to train Vietnamese pilots. For most of the sophisticated attack planes, transports and helicopters, it takes nearly two years from the time a trainee is selected until he is ready to join a unit.