

More Marines and Planes Heading for Indochina

Washington

The United States is sending thousands of additional Marines plus electronic warfare planes, jet refueling tankers, more helicopters and more transports to Indochina as concern grows here over evacuating 3000 Americans still in South Vietnam.

Senior U.S. officials describe the situation as "touch and go."

The prospects have increased that a swift emergency evacuation may be

necessary as Saigon's outer defenses crumble and North Vietnamese artillery and anti-aircraft missiles come within range of Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport.

A big question mark, however, is the political impact of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu's resignation. Conceivably, Thieu's departure could produce last-minute negotiations that could forestall an attack on the city and its airport and allow a more orderly evacuation.

The significant buildup of U.S. Navy, Marine and Air Forces already off the Indochina Peninsula includes:

- Several thousand Marines from the Third Marine Division who are preparing to board amphibious ships on Okinawa to join the more than 4000 Marines from that same division already on Navy carriers and other ships off the South Vietnamese coast.

- Air Force transport planes that have been ordered to pick up at least an additional 1500-man battalion of Marines from Hawaii and move them to Okinawa. They will remain there as a back-up force in the Pacific for the Third Division.

- Air Force helicopters based in Thailand that are being flown to the U.S. aircraft carrier Midway in the South China Sea to give the potential evacuation force a third carrier loaded with helicopters.

To cope with the increasing threat from North Viet-

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namese missile crews near Tan Son Nhut airport, the Air Force is also rushing specially equipped F-4 Phantom jets back to Thailand from bases in Okinawa.

These planes, used extensively in the U.S. air war against North Vietnam in the early 1970s, carry special equipment for detecting and jamming the radars that guide the Russian-built SA-2 missiles to their targets.

The Air Force has also begun a stepped-up airlift out of Tan Son Nhut using C-130 transports flying from bases in the Philippines.

These four-engine transports, while smaller and

slower than the C-141 and C-5A jet transports, are far more rugged and are viewed as a better bet to survive hits from smaller Russian anti-aircraft missiles that are also known to be in the Saigon area.

To help keep the growing U.S. air armada flying, the Air Force is also dispatching additional aerial refueling planes to Thailand.

There are also reported to be three U.S. merchant ships in Saigon harbor which conceivably could be used for evacuation purposes, through the narrow river channel is viewed as quite vulnerable.

The military buildup is meant to cope with an evac-

uation under fire, although U.S. officials hope the remaining Americans can be withdrawn without being threatened.

If Tan Son Nhut is under fire but an airlift still seems the best way out, then the Marines would be flown in to try and protect the field from direct assault, while U.S. jets struck missile batteries and, if they could spot them, long-range 130-mm. artillery.

If the airfield is shut down, then helicopters could be used to pick up Americans from locations in downtown Saigon, with Marines again being used to form protective rings around much smaller landing zones.

Though a helicopter evacuation was used without incident in Phnom Penh, senior U.S. officials are clearly worried about having to resort to helicopters again in Saigon, a city which could be in the midst of panic and anti-American violence if a final assault on the capital is launched.

While political developments could forestall such an attack, the prospects that a last-resort helicopter evacuation might be necessary increased in the past two days as U.S. military analysts concluded that the Saigon area has now clearly come within range of the Communists' anti-aircraft missiles and long-range artillery.

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