

74 Vietnamese Planes Flee to Thailand

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BANGKOK, Thailand, April 29—At least 74 South Vietnamese Air Force planes fleeing the country streamed into U Taphao air base in southern Thailand without warning this afternoon.

The pilots and passengers—2,000 people—requested asylum, American and Thai Foreign Ministry officials said.

About 30 of the planes were F-5 jet fighters and there were reports that at least one had crashed on a highway near the base as it was making its approach.

The planes began arriving at the huge naval and air base on the Gulf of Siam at about the time that the American evacuation of South Vietnam

was ending and the planes were still landing as night fell.

The planes were said to include C-47 transports and the C-130 cargo planes that the American military has been using to ferry refugees from South Vietnam to Guam and the Philippines. However, all the aircraft were understood to be Vietnam Air Force planes, originally supplied by the United States.

A Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman said that American authorities at U Taphao had been asked to turn over the aircraft to the Thai Government, which would return them to "the new South Vietnamese government." The pilots and passengers, the Thai spokesman said, "must leave Thailand."

"They just landed first and

asked permission afterwards," said an astounded Thai Foreign Ministry official. Other Government sources said that apparently no efforts were made to prevent the planes from landing and no aircraft went up to intercept the fighters as they roared in.

American Embassy officials in Bangkok declined to comment on the Thai request that the planes be returned and their status was unclear. An unresolved question here appeared to be whether the planes were still American property or belonged to whatever government continued in Saigon. The planes could be worth \$200-million, one official said.

No details were available on the status of the refugees or

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how the planes, pilots and passengers had made their escape from South Vietnam. But all those arriving were taken to the Evacuation Reception Center at U Taphao, which is already packed with more than 1,000 Cambodian refugees.

The unexpected arrival of these planes and new refugees scattered in other border areas of Thailand, were an embarrassment to the Thai Government, which has in recent days been avoiding direct links with the Americans, with the former pro-American governments in Indochina and with the refugees themselves.

"You have lost," a Thai Foreign Ministry official told an American, with embarrassment. "Within 48 hours it will all be over for you. Yet we will still be here."

Thais Mending Fences

The Thais have been trying to mend fences with some of their Communist neighbors and develop a militantly neutralist foreign policy as have most of the other non-Communist countries in the area, notably the Philippines—the other major American military stronghold in Southeast Asia.

Last Friday, for instance, the Thai Foreign Minister, Chatichai Choonhavan, met with Edward E. Masters, the acting United States chief of mission here, to discuss further American troop withdrawals from Thailand.

Announcement of a further scaling down of the size of the American force here is expected within a week, after members of the "Thai-U.S. Coordinating Committee" work out details.

There is now a force of about 25,000 Americans here, along with 350 aircraft, including 17 B-52 bombers and F-111 Phantom fighters. The planes and personnel are at four facilities—U Taphao, Nakhon Phanom, Nakhon Ratchasima and U Don.

Bases Used for Raids

At the height of the Vietnam war, many American bombing raids were launched from these facilities.

Thai officials are acutely sensitive to the fact that the Communist governments now flanking them remember those raids.

Next week, a North Korea delegation is expected in Bangkok, reportedly to discuss establishing diplomatic relations between Bangkok and Pyongyang.

Today, several senior Thai Foreign Ministry officials left on a "goodwill mission" to Moscow and Warsaw and other Thai officials have been quietly spreading the word that the Foreign Minister is considering a visit to Peking.