

U.S. Gets From Thailand Planes Flown by Refugees

By JOHN W. FINNEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 5 — The Defense Department disclosed today that the United States had started removing from Thailand many of the 120 planes flown there by fleeing South Vietnamese pilots last week before the Communists took control in Saigon.

Both North Vietnam and the new Saigon Revolutionary Government demanded that Thailand turn over the planes, but Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger said at a Pentagon news conference last Thursday that the United States still retained title to the aircraft, which it supplied to the former South Vietnamese Government under the military aid program.

The United States also announced jointly with the Thai Government today that the 25,000-man American military force in Thailand would be reduced by about 25 per cent in the next two months.

The Thai Foreign Ministry in

Bangkok described the reduction as part of a program to phase out an American military presence in Thailand by next March in accordance with a policy announced when the current Government took office this March.

United States officials, however, were much less emphatic on this point.

The troop reduction is part of a gradual withdrawal of United States troops that was under way before the surrender of Saigon to the Communists. In the wake of the Communist take-over, however, a question is now arising whether Thailand will permit a residual American force to remain.

Both the removal of the American-built aircraft, begun after initial Thai objectives, and the scheduled troop reductions underscored the uncertainties and strains that have

Continued on Page 14, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

grown in relations between the United States and Thailand—which are allies in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization—with the fall of the American-supported Government in South Vietnam.

Thailand's Premier, Kukrit Pramoj, said after the surrender of Saigon that his Government would enter into negotiations with the Vietnamese Communists concerning return of the planes. But after the American position was enunciated, Thai officials said they would have to re-examine the issue.

Over the weekend, the aircraft carrier Midway anchored off the Thai port of Sattahip and, according to Pentagon officials, began loading 54 F-5 fighter planes and A-37 light attack bombers. Some C-130 transport planes were being flown from Thaillan to Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

Some Unite to Be Withdrawn

A joint American-Thai announcement on troops said the authorized strength of United States forces in Thailand would be reduced from the present approved level of 27,000 to 19,500 by the end of June. The actual strength now is 25,000 men, most of them in the Air Force.

Along with the troop reduction, the United States is due to withdraw some of the Air Force squadrons now stationed in Thailand. The Air Force has about 350 planes in Thailand, including about 200 fighter-bombers and 12 B-52 strategic bombers.

Ron Nessen, the Presidential press secretary, predicted today that there would be further reductions in the United States force in Thailand and said that if the Thai Government wanted all the Americans withdrawn, "then, of course, they will be withdrawn."

In the view of State and Defense Department officials, however, the Thai Government is still divided on whether all American forces should be removed.

One element in the Thai Government, apparently led by Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, is demanding that American servicemen be removed as quickly as possible. But according to United States officials, there is another strong element that is inclined to permit a continuing American military presence in Thailand, at least until Bangkok can reassess its policy in the new situation in Southeast Asia.

"They are obviously searching for a new policy," one official said, "and for the moment are uncertain what to do about an American military presence."