

Foreigners Seek Exit

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WXPost Vietnam Airlift Extended

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BANGKOK — The North Vietnamese government, France and Thailand have quietly reached an agreement to extend the little publicized airlift that is Saigon's last official refugee route to the outside world.

For several thousand foreigners remaining in South Vietnam, the airlift is the main hope for departure. Almost all the people now leaving Saigon carry French passports, although there has been a trickle of Koreans, Filipinos, and other nationalities.

It is estimated that up to 50 Americans and dependents are now in South Vietnam. Although there is no official figure, perhaps 5,000 French and Vietnamese eligible for French papers are in South Vietnam.

The airlift was interrupted for a week at the start of this year, evidently because of continuing negotiations to

work out the extension. Some refugees, however, said that unexplained "explosions" heard at Tansonnhut Airport in Saigon Jan. 2 may have been a factor.

At any rate, the flights resumed Jan. 6 following discreet talks between the North Vietnamese and government-owned Air France, according to official sources. The servicing of the flights in Bangkok — previously handled by a local travel company — was shifted to Thai International Airline.

The airlift — using Caravelle jets with some early flights being routed via Vientiane, Laos — has been in operation since September and has averaged four flights weekly.

There is no official figure of the number of people brought out of Saigon, but it is estimated to be about 3,000. The French consulate in Bangkok reports that 5,000 people — most carrying

French papers — have been brought out.

In addition, a few other flights have been permitted to bring people out of Saigon under the nominal auspices of the International Committee for the Red Cross.

In late December, four such flights carried several hundred Indians and Pakistanis to Dacca. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees also flew several flights into Vientiane and Hong Kong last year.

It is estimated that 6,000 to 7,000 people have been permitted to leave Saigon on all these flights.

How long the new airlift agreement will run was not revealed. Private sources say it will run through February and perhaps longer. Refugees coming from Saigon have told of recurrent reports in the former South Vietnamese capital that the airlift would be terminated at the end of February or in March.