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Thais Say U.S. Technicians Can Stay; 3,000 Total Cited

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BANGKOK, March 9—The Thai government has agreed in principle to allow large numbers of U.S. servicemen—reportedly up to 3,000—to remain in the country as technicians beyond the planned March 20 deadline for withdrawal of American forces.

The decision, announced by the Foreign Ministry today, will almost certainly become a major issue as Thailand approaches national elections next month.

A wave of political murders already poses a grave threat to Thailand's tenuous experiment with democracy and is setting the stage for renewed anti-American sentiment here. Before today's announcement, powerful student groups had demanded assurances that U.S. forces would be removed by March 20.

The Foreign Ministry statement said that the

United States had "proposed to the Thai government certain projects of cooperation that would require the continued presence of a number of American technicians after the March 20 deadline."

The statement said Thailand had in turn proposed a set of "general principles" to "safeguard the national interests" of Thailand. If agreement on these principles is reached by March 20, the "technicians" will be allowed to remain, the Foreign Ministry said.

There are understood to be 5,000 U.S. servicemen in Thailand. During the height of the war in Indochina, there were 50,000. Under the original withdrawal agreement, only a 270-member military aid detachment was to remain in Thailand after March 20.

Government leaks to Thai newsmen in recent days indicate that 3,000 may be allowed to remain. The leaks suggested that Prime Minis-

ter Kukrit Pramoj was attempting to prepare public opinion for the shift in plans.

Following the Communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia last year, Kukrit's administration grew panicky and insisted that all U.S. forces be withdrawn so that Thailand could reach a working agreement with its neighbors.

Now, with the army providing the impetus, the government evidently has decided that the Thai military forces cannot afford to stand on their own.

The U.S. embassy has refused to comment publicly or privately on the negotiations. "We'll have nothing to say until a decision is reached," an embassy spokesman said.

This attitude and the evasiveness of government leaders has heightened the distrust from the left.

Suspicion of U.S. intentions in Thailand led the National Student Council of Thailand earlier this week to demand an answer from the U.S. embassy as to when all U.S. servicemen would be withdrawn from the country.

A group of student council leaders met for two hours with embassy officials. One of the students told newsmen that political counselor Thomas F. Conlon said, "You'd better go and ask your government" for the exact date of the pull-out.

The political killings have driven a broad wedge between left and right, polarizing political forces to an unprecedented degree. University students, who played a leading role in overthrowing the Thai military dictatorship in 1973, have become deeply suspicious of the army, the government's surveillance apparatus and the

United States which, they believe, actively supports the rightists.

Meanwhile a number of Thai and Western observers are fearful that the army is still considering a coup or some other means of heading off elections. "We can only hope that the cooler heads in the army will realize that a coup will trigger off bloodshed, the likes of which Thailand has never seen," said one longtime Western resident.

Although a few members and workers of rightist parties have been targets of violence in the campaign leading to the April 4 elections, most victims have been leftists. This, according to observers, clearly reflects efforts by powerful conservatives to stanch what they see as Thailand's drift toward communism, now that its neighbors in Indochina are under Communist governments.

At the Buddhist cremation rites last week for Socialist Party Secretary General Boonsanong Boonyothayan, assassinated by an unknown assailant, party members played a tape recording that they said had been made at a secret meeting of the Internal Security Operations Command a few weeks before.

On the tape, a voice identified by party members as that of an officer in the security command described Boonsanong and 11 other persons, including professors and student and labor leaders, as "dangerous" leftists who had infiltrated national organizations and were to be "watched closely."

Socialist Party Deputy Secretary General Virat Sakchirapapong charged that the security command arranged the assassination of Boonsanong.

VIRAT, 24, also claimed

that the security command, acting with "the support of the Americans," wanted to terrorize the Socialist Party because they considered it Communist.

Asked to comment, a U.S. embassy spokesman said, "It is a tragic untruth that the United States has been involved in any such tragic events."

Meanwhile, the political killings have caused concern and tension among a broad spectrum of non-political Thais.

In the last few weeks, in addition to Boonsanong, three allegedly leftist students were killed in a bombing attack on their technical college, an executive of the student council was shot dead and a suspected member of the extreme rightist Red Gaur paramilitary organization was killed when he hurled a bomb at the Bangkok headquarters of the liberal New Force Party.