

U.S. Research Agency Leaving Thailand

BANGKOK (UPI)—A Pentagon agency said to have carried out intelligence and policymaking in Thailand over the last decade is to quietly close its doors at the end of this month as part of the wind-down in America's military role in Southeast Asia.

The agency is a field facility of the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), a little-known organization that develops classified electronic research and intelligence systems as well as more mundane items such as new combat packs, boots and field rations.

When ARPA's office here was opened in 1962, it was billed as a facility to help Thailand's military develop its own research and development capability. It grew to an organization with a staff of more than 140 and became by far the largest of ARPA's five overseas branches, spending about half of a \$25 million yearly budget for a program known as Project Agile.

ARPA's Bangkok office also became involved in wider activities such as defoliation and counterinsurgency work, leading to charges that the advisory role to the Thai military was merely a cover for other jobs.

Almost to a man, the professional staff of about 30 American scientists that has phased out the facility's last research projects over the last few months feels that much of the criticism has been unjustified.

U.S. officials still decline to discuss, on grounds of security, many of the projects ARPA was involved in, and there is still no official confirmation that the agency used airplanes of Air America, a charter line that works for the CIA and other U.S. government agencies in Southeast Asia, to defoliate an area of jungle in Thailand in 1965 and 1966.

An ARPA source said the

defoliating was done to test results in an area under secure conditions that were not available in Vietnam.

The same source said that a later Thai government request for ARPA's help to defoliate an area in North Thailand where Communist guerrillas were active was refused because the defoliants had been found harmful to animals and humans.

ARPA also ran projects to gather intelligence material on Communist guerrillas from Thai sources, and ARPA teams helped develop ground and airborne sensor systems to detect Communist movement through the jungle. Some of these systems have had application in the electronic warfare system the United States has used to locate bombing targets in Laos and Vietnam.

The workers at ARPA say they have done valuable work in such areas as soil testing, vegetation and environmental sciences that have peaceful as well as military applications.

When ARPA closes its doors here it will leave behind the military research and development center, a facility built jointly with Thailand that will be operated by the Thai supreme command. ARPA is also leaving about half a million dollars' worth of electronic equipment and the unclassified portion of its reference library, which runs to about 20,000 volumes.