

OCT 28 1972

Viet Buildup Six Months Shy of Goal

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If a cease-fire is signed this month, the U.S. Vietnamization effort will be halted about six months short of its planned goal of making Saigon's air and ground forces strong enough to resist the North Vietnamese without U.S. combat support or airpower.

Pentagon sources said that, in terms of equipment, the chief "shortfall" will be in South Vietnamese air power.

These sources also said that slightly more than half of the South Vietnamese infantry divisions need "about six months more" training, partly by U.S. teams which are now to be withdrawn under terms of the cease-fire.

In overall terms, Pentagon sources said, there is no way to meet the spring 1973 goal of increasing South Vietnam strength to some 1,800 fixed-wing planes and helicopters by suddenly speeding up now.

Current South Vietnamese strength is 1,300 aircraft. It is estimated that perhaps 200 more helicopters and other aircraft can be shipped from the United States or turned over to the South Vietnamese by U.S. units in Vietnam within the next week or so.

The most critical airplane for the South Vietnamese is the long-promised F-5E air defense fighter. It is deemed capable of replacing U.S. Air Force interceptors in coping with incursions by Hanoi's Mig jets at certain altitudes.

In the rush to adjournment earlier this month, Congress appropriated \$90.4 million for 57 of the 70-odd F-5Es slated for Vietnam starting early next year. None are now in production.

Pentagon sources said various solutions for getting the aircraft to Vietnam next year were being discussed, possibly by shipping earlier model F-5As now and replacing them with the new planes on a "one-for-one" basis, as appar-

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ently permitted under the cease-fire provisions.

A second requirement for 24 more A-37 close-support jet fighters is being met by stripping Air Force reserve units of such planes and sending them to Vietnam now.

Still under discussion are other South Vietnamese requests, notably for more transport aircraft. U.S. Air Force C-130 transports played a major role in supporting Saigon forces during Hanoi's spring offensive.

Pentagon sources said that the South Vietnamese air force pilot training establishment centered in Nha Trang could be augmented, if need be, by U.S. or other foreign civilians as U.S. military advisers pulled out.

South Vietnam's regular army—bloodied like its foe in the spring battles—is a "mixed bag," according to U.S. planners. Its sizeable losses of tanks, artillery, and other equipment from April through June have been largely replaced, except for armored personnel carriers, and no major overall increases were planned for next year.

Under the cease-fire provisions, any future losses—and presumably expenditures of ammunition or fuel—could be made up on a "one-for-one" basis, Pentagon sources said. Current stocks of ammunition and other supplies are ample and are being replenished by the United States as usual.

Yesterday morning, Jerry Friedheim, deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, emphasized to newsmen that Vietnamization had not been cut back. "It will go forward," he said, "until Vietnamization is superseded by a negotiated settlement, as we all hope."

"The other side has not ceased its infiltration or resupply efforts at this particular time and we have not ceased ours either," Friedheim said.

Equipment and supplies aside, the South Vietnamese

ground forces are, in general, rated as still below go-it-alone status, and that is seen as an important factor in repulsing any last-minute push by Hanoi.

Half of Saigon's 12 ground divisions, composed largely of raw recruits, need another six months training, by U.S. planners' estimates. The first infantry, the marines and the airborne divisions around Hue are "in good shape" with less satisfactory ratings given to the 25th and 18th divisions near Saigon, and the 7th in the Mekong Delta.

An American-run program of battalion unit training, long-sought by U.S. advisers, was begun in June. It was aimed initially at reconstituting the units most badly mauled during the spring offensive.

So far, less than half the ARVN's 190-odd battalions have gone through the program. The withdrawal of the U.S. training teams would leave the effort to the Vietnamese.

Ultimately, Pentagon sources stressed, President Thieu's choice of military leaders so far—a mixed bag—will have a decisive effect on Vietnamization, regardless of the presence or withdrawal of U.S. advisers and training teams.

Withdrawal of U.S. troops and remaining equipment from Vietnam within the 60-day period specified in the cease-fire provisions poses little problem, Pentagon officials said. Even the departure of 37,000 South Korean troops can be handled by U.S. ships.

Pentagon sources emphasized that U.S. fighter-bombers in Thailand and U.S. Navy carriers in the South China Sea would not be pulled out prior to the final release of U.S. prisoners during the 60-day period following the signing of a cease-fire. After the 60-day period, some pull-outs of units rushed to Southeast Asia during the spring offensive might occur, depending on the local situation.