

U.S. Ups Civilian Role in Vietnam

By Michael Putzel
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SAIGON — (AP) —

While preparing to withdraw its military forces, the United States is making plans to substitute civilian advisers, U.S. military sources said today.

The draft agreement, negotiated but still unsigned by Washington and Hanoi, calls for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam within 60 days of a cease-fire. There is no known provision regarding U.S. civilians.

The sources said the United States secretly plans to take advantage of the loophole by contracting with civilian firms to carry out the military advisory function.

The program would, in effect, put the United States back where it was in 1954 when there were 685 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam, a figure that reached 23,000 in 1965 — or one for every 30 Vietnamese involved in the war effort.

Scope

A number of private companies already are operating in Vietnam. Several now specialize in supply and maintenance. They could simply expand their current projects, the sources said.

The scope of the program isn't known, but informants said the framework would be similar to that in Laos, where the United States has been fighting a so-called secret war for 10 years while barred from overt military participation by the 1962 Geneva agreements.

One private firm in Laos, Air America, flies supply and even combat missions under contract to the U.S. government. It has been linked to Central Intelligence Agency operations.

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Air America also operates in Vietnam.

Not New

The U.S. Embassy in Laos has more than 200 military attaches, most of whom fly support missions for the Laos forces. The U.S. Agency For International Development's requirements office is staffed largely by former military personnel who funnel arms and supplies to the CIA-backed army of Meo hill tribesmen.

Civilian advisory programs aren't new in Vietnam, either. In 1959, six years before the big American buildup began, the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group had a branch known as the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission.

The mission hired civilian contractors to advise the South Vietnamese army in such fields as engineering, ordnance and communications.

In recent days, the English-language Saigon Post has carried want ads placed by Lear Siegler Inc. and an unidentified "major U.S.-invited contractor," listing openings in dozens of technical jobs.

Both firms want armament specialists. And Lear Siegler is looking for helicopter, fixed-wing and jet-engine mechanics as well as aircraft crew chiefs.

Several private American companies already have U.S. contracts to maintain American and South Vietnamese military aircraft. Sources said their roles would be expanded in a total U.S. military pullout.

One-for-One

One case cited involves 30 big C-130 Hercules transports being rushed to Vietnam from Air Force reserve and Air National Guard units in the United States in an effort to strengthen Saigon's Air Force before a cease-fire.

The draft agreement stipulates that after a cease-fire the United States can only replace existing military equipment on a one-

The South Vietnamese have no flight crews or ground personnel trained to handle the \$3 million planes. Sources said the United States wants to get the aircraft into the Vietnamese air force inventory before a cease-fire.

The sources said the training of C-130 pilots and maintenance men will be handled by civilian contract firms supported by the U.S. Air Force Advisory Group. If a peace agreement is signed before the training is completed, the sources added, the civilian contractors will take over the entire program.

Informants said several hundred armored vehicles — perhaps as many as 500 tanks and armored personnel carriers — are being flown to South Vietnam. The shipments also include A-1H attack bombers and CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

B-52 Raids

In war action, more than 100 B-52's ranged across North and South Vietnam and Laos today, pounding suspected enemy stockpiles with 2,500 tons of explosives.

Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops, continuing their widespread hit-and-run attacks, struck at more than 100 targets in South Vietnam for the ninth consecutive day.

Nearly all the attacks were by shelling or small ground units. This indicated the enemy is trying to make his presence felt as widely as possible without risking heavy losses in battle.

North Vietnam claimed shore batteries set ablaze a U.S. warship off the North Vietnamese coast.