

SFChronicle

Secret U.S. Plan -- Civilian Advisers

Report on Post-War Viet Aid

Associated Press

Saigon

While preparing to withdraw its military forces under a peace agreement, the U.S. is making plans to substitute civilian advisers for American troops, U.S. military sources said yesterday.

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 U.S. secretly plans to take advantage of the loophole by contracting with civilian firms to carry out the military advisory function.

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

SCOPE

The scope of the program isn't known, but informants said the framework would be similar to that in Laos, where the U.S. has been fighting a so-called secret war for ten 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. Air America also operates in Vietnam.

The U.S. embassy in Vientiane has more than 200 military attaches, most of whom support the Royal Lao 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, the U.S. Military advisory group had a branch that 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

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an unidentified "major U.S.-invited contractor," seeking applications for 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 case cited involves 30 big C-130 Hercules transports being rushed to Vietnam from Air Force reserve and Air National Guard units in the U.S. in an effort to beef up Saigon's Air Force before a cease-fire.

AGREEMENT

The draft agreement stipulates that after a cease-fire the U.S. can only replace existing military equipment on a one-for-one basis under international supervision.

The South Vietnamese have no personnel trained to handle the \$3 million planes.

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.

They also said several hundred armored vehicles are being flown to South Vietnam aboard giant C-5A jet transports from the U.S. the shipments also include A-37 attack bombers and CH-47 Chinook helicopters.