

Officials Say U.S. Will Trim Civilians After a Cease-Fire

By Peter Osnos
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SAIGON, Jan. 7—The United States is planning to leave several thousand civilian advisers and technicians in South Vietnam when the military withdraws, but the number will be lower than it is now and gradually reduced, according to American officials.

At the United States embassy, at the offices of the Agency for International Development and at the headquarters of the U.S. command, officials go to some lengths to portray the U.S. presence after the expected cease-fire as a limited one—nothing like the tens of thousands of construction workers and Defense Department-funded technicians employed here in the peak years of U.S. involvement.

Many of the remaining civilians, officials said, will be involved in getting the military out quickly and then will leave themselves. About a thousand will be with AID serving in reconstruction and development projects and as police advisers.

The rest, an unknown number at this point, will provide technical assistance to the South Vietnamese government and armed forces, mostly on contracts approved and funded through the U.S. Department of Defense. Their job, according to one top-level American, will be to "keep in shape" South Vietnamese equipment.

The role of AID in helping South Vietnam back on its feet has not been disputed. But concern has been expressed here and in Washington about the possibility that the civilian

contractors may simply be substitutes for the departing military, performing many of the same functions and continuing the U.S. commitment to the survival of President Thieu's government.

At the highest levels of the U.S. mission, the specter of an army of sport-shirted civilian "mercenaries" is described as "greatly exaggerated, grossly overstated," but no senior American is prepared to discuss the subject on the record.

Wilfred J. Curley, the civilian Defense Department official here in charge of most contracts awarded by his department, said in an interview that the overall number of civilian employees, which he estimated currently at about 5,000, would go down steadily after the cease-fire.

"There might be a short-term increase for withdrawal purposes, to help us get out," he said, "but the total figures for the country are very much on the decrease."

Curley said that reports of an influx of thousands of new civilian advisers and technicians, perhaps doubling the present number, were incorrect.

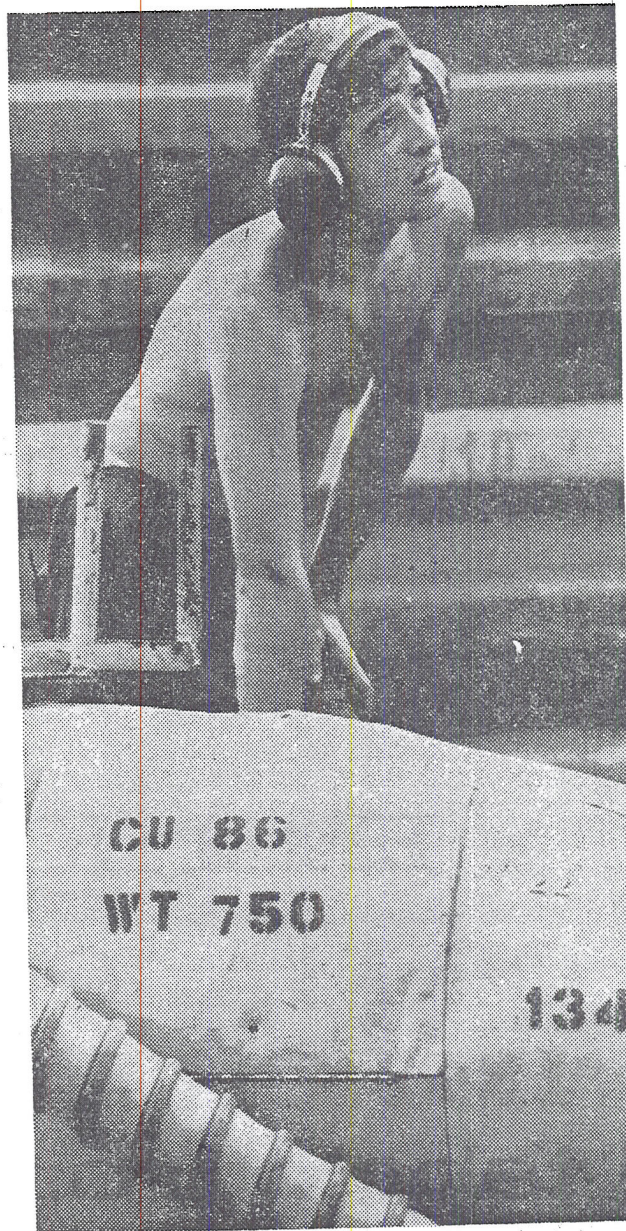
'Crash Withdrawal'

He acknowledged that the number of Defense Department contracts had increased by about 25 per cent in November when a cease-fire seemed imminent, but he said those new contracts were related to the "crash withdrawal aspects" envisioned in the draft agreement between Hanoi and Washington. "We were ready to move out immediately," he said.

At the moment, there are about 133 contracts supervised by Curley's office of the U.S. Army Procurement Agency, compared to 203 a year ago, according to his figures.

These contracts cover a wide range of functions. For example, one newspaper advertisement now appearing in Saigon's English-language newspaper seeks airborne navigation technicians, fire-control technicians, systems allocators and electronic sensor technicians.

Uncertainty about the future



Associated Press

A Marine with the last U.S. attack bomber unit in South Vietnam starts a jet engine at the Bienhoa air base.

is apparently the reason contractors have been advertising more extensively here in the last few months than seemed to be the case before.

"The recruitment program in the States has just about dropped out altogether," said Curley. "No one wants to uproot the family for a contract that's going to be over before it gets started."

At AID, planning is restricted by the uncertainty of congressional appropriations. The agency is now operating on a continuing resolution due to expire at the end of February and based on an appropriation of \$340 million.

Large Mission

From a peak of 2300 AID employees, the number has been reduced to about a thousand, and is scheduled to be about 900 by the end of the fiscal year. Despite its substantial decrease, the U.S. AID mission here is still far and away the largest in the world.

AID officials see their role after a cease-fire as the tradi-

tional one of helping with economic development. Americans will continue, however, to be active with the South Vietnamese police. As of today, there are 160 "public safety advisers" here, and there are no plans for a sizeable cut-back.

In making projections for the reconstruction period, AID officials say they have given no thought to the problems of working in areas held by the Vietcong or North Vietnamese. The whole premise of American activity after a cease-fire, officials concede, is that the United States will be supporting the Thieu government for the indefinite future.

The U.S. Embassy will be reorganized "like a normal diplomatic mission," senior Americans say, with an emphasis on reporting how well the cease-fire is working. Few in the embassy expect, however, that the United States will be any less involved than it is now in formulating South Vietnamese economic policy and advising Thieu on political matters.