

Why Nixon Called the Alert

Washington

The pre-dawn alert yesterday of American military forces around the world came after 48 hours of puzzling yet potentially dangerous signals that the Russians were planning to intervene unilaterally in the Middle East fighting.

As high-ranking U.S. officials tell it, the first unusual event came on Tuesday

when there was a sharp drop-off in the previously heavy Soviet airlift of supplies into Egypt and Syria.

At about the same time, U.S. intelligence reportedly began picking up initial indications that some Russian army and transport units had been placed on alert.

These two events, plus a continuation of the already heavy Soviet seairlift of sup-

plies to the war zone, led to the speculation shared by many top civilian and military officials that the Russians were planning some sort of military move in the Middle East.

It was reasoned that the airlift of cargo had ended abruptly because enough material was now under way by ship and the transport

Back Page Col. 7

From Page 1

planes were now being readied to carry the troops that had been alerted.

The mood of impending crisis deepened Wednesday when further alerts were detected reportedly involving Soviet airborne units and then flights of "several" of big AN-22 transports were detected heading for Cairo from bases believed to be in eastern Europe.

LETTER

Wednesday night, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin delivered what senior officials described as a "harshly worded" letter from Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to President Nixon, through Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. The note reportedly warned that Soviet troops would be sent to the Middle East in a unilateral action if necessary to enforce the on-again, off-again cease-fire.

The Dobrynin note, in combination with the earlier signals, convinced the Joint Chiefs of Staff and top civilian leaders that the Soviets might in fact carry out such a move, and resulted in what officials say was the clearest warning Washington could send to Russia — an alert of all U.S. forces.

The planes en route to Cairo actually landed there, but U.S. officials said they had not determined whether or not they carried troops. As of now, most officials doubt that even if they did have troops aboard, there were sufficient flights to have carried enough soldiers to make much difference in a battle.

The alert of U.S. forces, which U.S. officials repeatedly stressed was "precautionary" and did not put the country on a war-footing, followed meetings of the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The actual order to move to a higher state of readiness went out from the Joint Chiefs, on orders of the secretary of defense, between midnight and the early hours of yesterday morning.

The alert was to put all forces on basically a standby basis and was far from two much higher levels of alert that would accompany a prelude to all-out war. Basically, it meant that leaves were canceled, men were ordered to return to their units and prepared to move out if necessary.

CARRIER

There were some dramatic aspects, however, including the dispatch of a third U.S. aircraft carrier, the John F. Kennedy, into the Mediterranean from its post in the Eastern Atlantic, where it had been stationed for several days.

Also, 50 to 60 B-52 heavy bombers were ordered to return from their base at Guam to the U.S. The planes had been part of a 150-plane B-52 force on Guam used during the Vietnam war, but many of the later models of these planes still play a primary role as nuclear weapon carriers.

At Ft. Bragg, N.C., the 15,000-man 82nd Airborne Division, normally alerted first in a crisis, was told to be ready to move if necessary by 6 a.m.

Late yesterday, after the UN Security Council resolution seemed to defuse the tense situation by setting up a peace-keeping force without U.S. or Russian troops, there were strong indications that the U.S. alert would be called off gradually, with selected units put back on normal peacetime footing.

Yesterday's worldwide alert of U.S. forces is believed

to be the first time such an alert was flashed since the 1968 capture of the spy ship Pueblo by North Korea.

In contrast to the 1970 Middle East crisis, in which only selected U.S. units were alerted, yesterday's action applied to all forces — air, sea and ground, both conventional and nuclear.

LEVELS

The U.S. has five levels of alert. The most relaxed is level five and the normal is level four.

Yesterday, the U.S. forces were ordered to level three, which is a higher state of readiness and which means, for example, that the Strategic Air Command would have more of its pilots ready for duty than under normal circumstances.

For more than two weeks, steadily growing U.S. and Soviet fleets have been spread out through the Mediterranean, concentrated mostly at the eastern end.

The Russians now have about 80 ships there — a record number. About half of them are combatants and half support and auxiliary vessels.

The U.S. Sixth Fleet now numbers more than 50 vessels including three attack carriers with about 250 planes in total and two helicopter carriers with a combined load of 3500 to 4000 marines.

In contrast to the U.S. fleet, which has considerable ability to extend offensive power over land, the Soviet fleet is more designed to do battle afloat and to protect shipping lanes, rather than to put men or planes ashore.

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