

U.S. Is Relaxing Its Alert

Washington

The United States began removing its forces, including the Strategic Air Command, from a readiness alert yesterday but conditioned its actions on Soviet moves to take Russian airborne divisions off alert.

President Nixon, who said he had ordered the alert to demonstrate that the U.S. would not accept the introduction of Soviet forces into the Middle East, announced at a White House news conference last night that the two main strategic arms — the Strategic Air Command and the North American Air Defense Command — have been removed from the general alert of American military forces.

At a Pentagon news conference earlier in the day, Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger said that two command units — the 11,000-man Southern Command in Panama and the 25,000-man Alaska command — were removed from the readiness status at midnight Thursday night — 24 hours after the alert was issued to all American forces.

Schlesinger confirmed that the worldwide alert was ordered late Wednesday night after the U.S. received several "indicators," including a "comprehensive alert" of all Soviet airborne forces, suggesting that the Soviet Union was about to send troops to the Middle East.

The key to when the U.S.

lifts the general alert," he made clear, now depends on when the Soviet Union returns its airborne troops to their normal status.

"We do not know at this stage whether the Soviets have reduced their alert status," he said, explaining that it is easier to determine when troops have been placed on alert than when they are removed.

"We are carefully watching their status," he said. "We will begin to make selective reductions of our readiness as conditions warrant."

The crisis atmosphere that momentarily swept through the Pentagon early Thursday was gone yesterday. Schlesinger repeatedly emphasized that the general alert was only a "precautionary" and "intermediary" step intended to "enhance the readiness" of the forces and not to prepare them for movement into combat.

"We were very far away from a confrontation" with the Soviet Union, he said of the swift-moving events that began with the disclosure that American forces had been placed on alert.

DETENTE

Schlesinger emphasized that the fact that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were able to work out two cease-fires and a final agreement on a peacekeeping force as "a tribute to the strength of detente."

Asserting that detente has proved to be "a two-way street," the secretary hinted that some understanding has been worked out to provide relief for the Egyptian Third Corps, which has been encircled by Israeli forces on the east bank of the Suez Canal since the first cease-fire on Monday. While he declined to describe the arrangement, he said an "eminently satisfactory" answer has been reached to relieve the plight of the Egyptian force.

Schlesinger said that he ordered the general alert on his own authority as secretary of Defense, with the decision subsequently approved by President Nixon. At his news conference Thursday, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger gave the impression that Mr. Nixon had ordered the alert in the early morning hours of Thursday.

In outlining the series of

nighttime discussions at the White House that led to the decision to issue the alert, Schlesinger said a meeting of the National Security Council had begun around 11 p.m. on Wednesday. Present were Kissinger, Schlesinger, Admiral Thomas G. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and William E. Colby, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

At around 11:30 p.m., Schlesinger said, he instructed Moorer to issue a general alert to the armed forces placing them in "defense condition three," which is basically a stand-by alert.

He said that he made this initial decision by himself without talking directly with the President. He went on to say, however, that the President was "in complete command at all times" and later approved a "whole series of decisions" that the National Security Council had made in meetings lasting until nearly 3 a.m.

The authorship of the alert order was further obscured last night when Mr. Nixon told his news conference that "I ordered (the alert) shortly after midnight" after receiving information "that led us to believe that the Soviet Union was planning to send a very substantial military force into the Middle East."

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