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U.S. Is Easing the Alert, But Links Step to Soviet

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 26—The United States began removing its forces from a readiness alert today but conditioned its actions on moves by Moscow to take Soviet Airborne forces off alert.

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

[Question]

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

Mr. Schlesinger confirmed that the worldwide alert was ordered late Wednesday night after the United States had 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.

Soviet Actions the Key

The key to when the United States 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 was easier to determine when troops had been placed on alert than when they were 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 yesterday was gone today. Mr. 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.

The Power of Détente

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

Mr. Schlesinger emphasized that the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union were able to work out two cease-fires and a final agreement on a peacekeeping force was "a tribute to the strength of détente."

lieve the plight of the Egyptian force.

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

Soviet Message Noted

In outlining the series of nighttime discussions at the White House that led to the decision to issue the alert, Mr. Schlesinger said a meeting of the National Security Council had begun around 11 P.M. on Wednesday. Present were Mr. Kissinger, Mr. Schlesinger, Adm. Thomas G. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and William E. Colby, Director of Central Intelligence.

Mr. Schlesinger declined to discuss what precipitated the National Security Council meeting, but officials said it was a Soviet diplomatic note received a few hours earlier warning that the Soviet Union would unilaterally send troops into Egypt, partly to protect the encircled III Corps, if the United States would not agree to the dispatch of a joint peacekeeping force.

At around 11:30 P.M., Mr. Schlesinger said, he instructed Admiral 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 had made this initial decision 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.

Nixon Not Present

White House officials said that Mr. Nixon, who was in his upstairs quarters at the White House Wednesday night was not present for any of the National Security Council deliberations but was in periodic contact by telephone.

Among the "plethora of indicators" that led the National Security Council members to conclude that the Soviet Union might be preparing for a unilateral introduction of troops into the Middle East, Mr. Schlesinger listed first information that Moscow had alerted an airborne force of around 40,000 to 50,000 men. Some sources have reported that this force was moving to potential staging points in the southern part of the Soviet Union.

Under questioning, Mr. Schlesinger acknowledged that the alert of the Soviet airborne forces had been ordered five or six days ago and was known by United States officials before yesterday's crisis developed. But he explained that officials became more concerned about it when the Soviet airlift into Egypt and Syria began declining on Monday and "diminished to zero flights on Tuesday."

Asserting that "détente" had proved to be "a two-way street," the Secretary hinted that some understanding had been worked out to provide relief for the Egyptian III 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 had been reached to re-

The implication, he said, was that the Soviet Union was mobilizing the air transports for a new purpose—the carrying of some airborne troops to Egypt.