

U.S. Carrier Force Is Sent  
Toward the Indian Ocean

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 29—

The United States moved a naval task force including an aircraft carrier, toward the Indian Ocean today in what the Defense Department first suggested was a response to a Soviet naval build-up in the Mediterranean, but then insisted was a periodic demonstration of seapower.

The Defense Department announced that the attack carrier Hancock, accompanied by five destroyers and a tanker, was moving today through the Strait of Malacca, which separates Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula.

The force was scheduled to be in the Indian Ocean within a day.

The present destination of the force is the Persian Gulf area, although officials held out the possibility that orders could be changed and the carrier withdrawn from the Indian Ocean.

The Hancock had been with the Seventh Fleet in the Western Pacific. Why the United States was sending it to the Persian Gulf at a time when the Middle East crisis seemed to be abating was not completely explained by the Defense Department. However, in contrast to the normal secrecy surrounding naval movements, the Pentagon volunteered that the Hancock had been dispatched.

Under questioning, the Pentagon's chief spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim first linked the movement of the carrier force to the alert of American troops last week and to a continuing build-up of the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean.

But several hours later, after news-agency articles described the movement of the force as a response to the Soviet naval build-up, Mr. Friedheim said there was no connection with Soviet naval activities in the Mediterranean. Rather, he said, the United States was sending the carrier into the Indian Ocean only "to demonstrate

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we can operate there."

The worldwide alert was issued to United States forces early Thursday morning, when the Administration expressed concern that the Soviet Union was about to send a military force to Egypt.

At that time, according to defense officials, it was thought it would be useful in extending the military choices for the United States if there was a carrier on the southern flank of the Middle East, close to the oil-producing Arab nations. The carrier would have been in a position to help protect the sea lanes leading out of the Persian Gulf, as well as to support any air operations of American carriers in the Mediterranean.

As part of the alert, therefore, the Hancock, one of the older carriers, was ordered to the Indian Ocean. That alert has now been relaxed for most United States forces as the Administration concluded that the threat of Soviet intervention had abated with the establishment of a United Nations peace-keeping force in the Middle East.

#### Alert Is Relaxed

Only the Atlantic and European commands, comprising about 350,000 men, remain in readiness. The 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., the most likely force to be sent to the Middle East, was removed from alert over the weekend.

There remains some question about the alert status of Soviet airborne forces; reports of their movement toward readiness on Oct. 11 began prompting concern that the Soviet Union was

considering intervention. Mr. Friedheim had no comment today when asked whether Soviet airborne divisions were still on alert.

Presumably some American forces will be kept on alert until it is clear that the Soviet paratroopers are no longer on alert.

As the Soviet threat receded, defense officials again began to emphasize their concern over the build-up of the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean. Asked to explain why it was necessary to send the Hancock into the Indian Ocean now that the alert has been relaxed, Mr. Friedheim pointed to the Soviet naval build-up.

#### Thrust of Remark Altered

But later, Mr. Friedheim volunteered to reporters that there might have been an "unfortunate juxtaposition" in his comments and that the movement of the carrier toward the Indian Ocean should "not be juxtaposed against the Soviets in the Mediterranean."

Noting that Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger on Friday maintained that "we were very far away from a confrontation" with the Soviet Union, Mr. Friedheim quoted the Defense Secretary as saying "we are even further from a confrontation today."

The spokesman explained that once the carrier had been alerted to move into the Indian Ocean, it was decided to continue with the orders because "it presented a good opportunity to be in the Indian Ocean, where we like to be from time to time."

Mr. Friedheim also insisted that the United States was not attempting to give any "signals" to the Arab nations about cutting off supplies of oil.

Last week, at the height of the crisis, the Defense Department estimated the size of the Soviet Mediterranean fleet—normally 50 to 60 ships—at 85. Today, Mr. Friedheim put the number around 90, including a guided-missile cruiser and two guided-missile destroyers that moved through the Bosphorus into the Aegean Sea.

The American Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, which normally runs 40 to 50 ships, now totals 60, including three carriers. Last week, the carrier John F. Kennedy was sent to the Mediterranean, joining the In-

dependence and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Mr. Friedheim made clear today that there was no unusual Soviet naval activity in the Indian Ocean that could be related to the ordering of the Hancock to the Persian Gulf area. He said there was the "normal" Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean—about 20 ships, more than half research and support vessels.

#### 'Show the Flag'

In recent years, the United States has periodically sent carriers into the Indian Ocean, largely to "show the flag" and demonstrate the ability to move naval forces into the region.

In December, 1971, at the height of the Indian-Pakistani war, the nuclear-powered carrier Enterprise was sent into the Indian Ocean as a show of force to restrain India. The last United States carrier to visit

the Indian Ocean was the America, in March.

Meanwhile, informed officials said that the Administration was also concerned about a huge movement of Soviet rail traffic in Eastern Europe at the height of the Middle East war.

The traffic was described as the most concerted in Europe since World War II, with hundreds of trains tying up the rail system of Eastern Europe.

What was significant to intelligence analysts was that the rail movement was to the east, away from Soviet bases in Central Europe. At the time of the movement, which was first detected on Oct. 12, it was not clear to U.S. officials whether the Soviet Union was moving material from stockpiles in Central Europe to resupply Egyptian and Syrian forces or was moving it to airports to support an airborne intervention by Soviet troops.