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COMPROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. FORCES
FROM THAILAND: WAYS TO
IMPROVE FUTURE WITHDRAWAL
OPERATIONS

Departments of Defense
and State

102159

D I G E S T

Because of changing conditions in Southeast Asia, the Royal Thailand Government asked the United States to withdraw its combat forces from Thailand. At that time, March 1975, 27,000 military personnel were authorized for six bases and other facilities throughout the country. The phasedown resulted in U.S. force levels being reduced to less than 250 as of July 20, 1976. (See p. 1.)

Although a massive U.S. military force had been deployed to Thailand--about 46,300 in 1969--agreements authorizing such a force were minimal. This was particularly true regarding most of the military facilities constructed there and the disposition of the equipment assigned to them. Meanwhile, the Thai Government controlled the bases and the transportation facilities used by U.S. forces. Given these conditions, the Thai Government could have made the withdrawal operation much less successful. (See p. 4.) However, through the cooperation of the Thai Government and agreements reached during phasedown and withdrawal, the operation was successful. (See p. 5.)

One of the objectives of the phasedown was to maintain the best possible relations with Thailand. This was to be achieved in part by leaving operable facilities and by withdrawing only those items for which a valid U.S. need existed. (See p. 6.)

Items reported as excess to U.S. needs were turned over to the Thai Government. At five Royal Thailand Air Force bases

included in our review, major items transferred were valued at over \$12.6 million, and secondary items transferred were valued at over \$19 million. GAO found that, generally, these items were excess to U.S. requirements and could not be economically removed from Thailand. Over \$204 million (acquisition value) in real property improvements was left at these five bases. (See p. 10.)

A communications system and a stockpile of ammunition remain in Thailand. Some of the communications equipment is not excess to U.S. needs. However, the Thai Government also has a requirement for these items. Components of the communications system not excess to U.S. needs are being left at no cost to Thailand under a 3-year bailment agreement with the Thai Government. The Thai Government will in turn provide communications services in Thailand to the United States at no cost. The Thai Government agreed to purchase the ammunition over a 3-year period. Details of the sale are currently being negotiated. (See p. 15.)

Withdrawal of U.S. material from Thailand was generally effective. Incorporating lessons learned in previous phasedowns, the Department of Defense attempted to withdraw only material for which valid requirements existed. (See p. 17.)

Although GAO found that some improvements are needed in planning, managing, and coordinating withdrawal operations, millions of dollars of material was distributed to Pacific bases and to other U.S. installations to satisfy valid requirements. (See p. 23.)

In view of the amount of material involved and the short amount of time available, the withdrawal operation was commendable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future withdrawals and associated programs could be improved by applying the lessons learned from the Thailand and prior withdrawals.

The Secretary of Defense should:

- Direct that definite criteria for the peacetime withdrawal of U.S. forces from other countries be established. This should include policies and procedures for scaled as well as complete withdrawals.
- Designate a single manager responsible for coordinating withdrawal operations.
- Designate at each closing base a team under a manager with knowledge of overall defense requirements and give this team authority to immediately withdraw or dispose of assets.

Because of changing circumstances agreements may have to be modified, but they do provide a basis for mutual understandings, intentions, and rights of the participating parties.

In negotiating future basing agreements, the Secretary of Defense should, in cooperation with the Secretary of State, include provisions for protecting U.S. investments, either through their return or appropriate compensation for them, and for moving retrograde material without hindrance.

AGENCY COMMENTS

The Department of Defense concurred with the above recommendations. Its comments have been incorporated where appropriate throughout the report, and the comments relating to the recommendations are in appendix VII.

GAO discussed the report with State Department officials, and they concurred with its recommendations. Their comments have also been included where appropriate.

Although the Departments of Defense and State concurred with the recommendations, GAO recognizes that implementation may take some time. GAO will therefore continue to monitor the implementation of these recommendations.