

Tsunami Relief as a Subterfuge? The Pentagon Scrambles to Reenter its Old Thai Air Base

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Is the tsunami aftermath a “window of opportunity” for bolstering the Pentagon’s presence in Southeast Asia? The Thai people reject the proposed build-up of the American military at Utapao air base and in the Gulf of Thailand. The tragedy of the natural catastrophe in the Indian Ocean should not serve as a pretext for strengthening the U.S. military presence on land, sea and in the air in the region.

The Pentagon has announced it is returning to its old Vietnam War haunts at Utapao Royal Thai Naval Air Force Base 90 miles south of Bangkok on the Gulf of Thailand. In this clear escalation of the American military presence in Southeast Asia, the ostensible plan is to set up a “command center” for the tsunami emergency relief effort. Utapao air base will serve as a staging base for U.S. military and rescue aircraft. The emergency relief operations appear to provide a windfall opportunity for beefing up the American military presence in Southeast Asia, part of the expanding Pentagon strategy of “forward positioning,” establishing sites, so-called “air cargo hubs,” where American forces can stash equipment and enter and leave as desired.

During the Vietnam War, Utapao functioned from April 1967 as a major staging base for B-52s carrying out bombing raids over North Vietnam, and KC-35 stratotankers of the Strategic Air Command. Many American GIs served there 1.

Despite Thailand’s neutrality on the war in Iraq, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra allowed Utapao to be used by American warplanes flying into combat in Iraq last year, and into Afghanistan earlier. There is also speculation that Utapao, with its infamous facilities for ‘sophisticated interrogation’ (a military heirloom from the Vietnam era), is probably where various al-Qaeda suspects have been secretly grilled.

The command center will be largely operated by the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force. The naval air base, also now functioning as a local airport, is located a short drive from the tourist mega-center of Pattaya, whose roots also go back to the Vietnam era. The U. S. Navy is also dispatching the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group and the USS Bonhomme Richard expeditionary strike group to the immediate area offshore 2.

Is all this military redeployment to bolster ‘humanitarian aid’ efforts? The Thai people reject a build-up of the American military at Utapao air base and in the Gulf of Thailand. In this hour of calamity, they are grateful for all support — but not when tethered to a huge reentry by the Pentagon onto Thai soil. The tragedy of the present havoc in the Indian Ocean should not serve as a pretext for strengthening the U.S. military presence in this disaster-stricken

region.

1 For sites on Utapao air base and the American military, see <http://amer-thai2001.tripod.com/id30.html> ; <http://www.utapao.org/> (Utapao Alumni Association) ;

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/disaster-strickenregion.utapao.htm>

2 See “Hundreds of Americans Missing,” <http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/12/28/us-quake.ap/index.html>

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UPDATE 02 Jan 2005

by Sirinapha

By way of update, this from a letter in the Thai daily THE NATION (3 Jan 2005) by an informed reader praising the speedy U.S. relief build-up in and around Thailand:

“ ... The first foreign aid to Thailand was a US C130 on Wednesday, from Yakota, Japan. There were six C130s and three KC135s in the first wave. A US search-and-rescue helicopter already operating was from the Philippines.

The five-ship Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group arrived in the Gulf of Thailand from Hong Kong; its planes were on Thursday ... scouting for debris and such and will go to anchor off Sumatra ... when it's clear that, well, it's all clear. An entire US Navy Task Force is assigned to relief duty around Thailand and its waters. Three Marine disaster-relief assessment teams were on the ground in Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia by Wednesday for assessment. P3s have been moved to Utapao from Diego Garcia to do flyovers, photos and assessment, and they're doing that. A US Air Force team set up on Wednesday in Utapao. US Marines were in Utapao on Thursday.

According to AFP on Wednesday, the US military response is an aircraft carrier, other ships, at least 20 aircraft and thousands of sailors and marines. I just know what I read.”

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