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U.S. officials staying mum after deceptive airlift

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The Falasha airlift, accomplished with split-second timing and involving a certain degree of deception, was the kind of success the U.S. military has been looking for, a textbook operation that came off without a hitch.

Some 900 refugee Ethiopian Jews, called Falashas or "foreigners" by other Ethiopians, were airlifted over the weekend from the Sudan to Israel after Sudanese leaders were given the impression that their destination was not going to be Israel.

The mission was carried out by American officers who filed a flight plan that failed to mention Israel, in effect giving the fundamentalist Sudanese government something it could live with, according to informed officials.

The airlift began last Friday when from six to 10 C-130 Hercules transports flew from bases in West Germany to a remote gravel airstrip at Gedaref, Sudan. The airlift was executed with the speed and stealth with which the Israelis carried out their rescue mission to Entebbe. But there was no shooting.

American officials are bursting with pride over the success of the mission, but the political situation of Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeiri requires that they remain silent about how it was done. As

a leader who has imposed strict Islamic law on his nation, Mr. Nimeiri consented to the airlift only when he was assured that it would not make him appear to be helping Israel in any way.

Agreement on a plan worked out at the highest levels in Washington was reached on March 6 when Vice President George Bush met with President Nimeiri in Khartoum. Mr. Nimeiri reportedly said he had no objection to the United States taking the Ethiopian Jews away so long as they were not taken to Israel.

President Reagan's "No comment," and chief of staff Donald T. Regan's remark that the mission was too sensitive to discuss, were intended to protect the good relations between the United States and Sudan. Washington also has no wish to cause Mr. Nimeiri problems with other Moslem nations.

The basic plan apparently was worked out by the Central Intelligence Agency and approved by the White House. It

called for close coordination with the Air Force and with Israeli and Sudanese officials. It especially required that Mr. Nimeiri at the very least be able to plausibly deny that he knowingly assisted Israel.

The secret mission required that the 800 or 900 Falashas be moved quietly from their refugee camp in Tawawa, Sudan, to the dirt strip at Gedaref in the dead of night.

The American transport planes began landing at dawn last Friday and took on up to 90 Falashas as fast as they and their meager possessions could be loaded aboard. If the Sudanese were left with the impression that the Falashas were going to Europe or any destination other than Israel, that was the way it had to be.

Before noon on Friday, all the Falashas were gone. They landed at a secret destination in Israel. It is not known if the U.S. planes stopped somewhere else first, but there is reason to believe they probably refueled in Kenya — just as the Israeli rescue force did on the Entebbe raid.

The story came to light only because a Los Angeles Times reporter, Charles T. Powers, happened to be in Gedaref. He had gone to the airstrip the night before the U.S. planes arrived and was promptly taken into custody by Sudanese officials for 18 hours until the in-and-out mission was completed.

The role of Mr. Powers caused considerable unexplained concern Saturday when national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane was called to the phone from the Gridiron Club dinner. The calls were prompted by the worry of Los Angeles Times officials that their reporter might encounter trouble because of the story he filed describing some details of the mission.

Officials said Mr. McFarlane made certain representations to the govern-

ment of the Sudan to ensure that the reporter would not be detained or punished for reporting what he saw and heard at Gedaref. One official, who declined to be quoted, said he believed the reporter is not in a dangerous situation.

Mr. Powers had written that he heard the drone of the airplanes landing and taking off while he was in custody and saw other evidence that the Falashas had been flown away in a precision operation.

The Falasha refugees became a hot issue for President Nimeiri after Operation Moses successfully removed 7,800 Falashas from the Sudan to Israel between last November and early January. When this leaked in Israel, the Falashas became a matter of delicate concern for the Sudanese.

Operation Moses aroused denunciations from a number of Arab states, and Mr. Nimeiri called off the airlift to Israel.

There were fewer than 1,000 Falashas remaining in the Tawawa camp when Mr. Bush raised the matter with Mr. Nimeiri. The Sudanese president said in an interview that he would no longer help Israel to receive more people but he did not care if the Falashas went somewhere else.

Several U.S. officials, although remaining silent on details of the airlift, seemed privately proud that the mission had been pulled off with such precision by the Air Force.