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U.S. Vacates Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan

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Barracks of the Manas Air Base.

All soldiers will vacate the U.S. Manas Transit Center near the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek within a week, the U.S. Ambassador to the Central Asian country said Tuesday.

Following a ceremony at which symbolic keys to the airfield were handed over, Ambassador Pamela Spratlen said cooperation between the two countries would continue, Interfax reported.

The base, which is formally known as a transit center, was the main hub for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Since it opened in late 2001, it has processed more than 5.3 million U.S. servicemen, or 98 percent of all military personnel involved in the operation, the news agency reported.

Kyrgyzstan, a member of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, declined to extend the U.S.' lease of the base last year. Russia has opposed the U.S.' military presence in the region, and after it promised Kyrgyzstan $1 billion in military aid and the financing

of hydropower infrastructure projects, President Almazbek Atambayev vowed to move the U.S.' Manas facility.

Russia has its own air base on the other side of Bishkek, 30 kilometers from Manas, near the city of Kant. The U.S.' departure is expected to tip the balance of influence in Central Asia in Russia and China's favor.

The U.S. also used the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan from 2001, but was asked to vacate it in 2005.

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