

P.O.W.'s: U.S. Aircraft To Fly Them From Hanoi

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 24 — The release of American prisoners of war is to begin by mid-February under the peace agreement, with all the prisoners returned by the end of March.

Henry A. Kissinger, the principal American negotiator of the peace agreement, disclosed today that North Vietnam had agreed to turn over the prisoners in Hanoi, rather than in some other country, as had been expected by the United States.

Mr. Kissinger, who described the arrangements for exchange of prisoners as "one of the thorniest issues" in the peace negotiations, said at his White House briefing that the release of the first prisoners was expected no more than 15 days after the formal signing of the peace agreement Saturday.

U.S. Planes to Be Used

Mr. Kissinger also disclosed that North Vietnam had agreed that the prisoners could be evacuated from Hanoi in American planes, presumably the planes would use the Gia Lam Airport outside Hanoi, which was damaged in the intensive American bombing last month.

American prisoners held in Laos would also be turned. American prisoners held in South Vietnam would be released to American authorities at "designated points" in that country, Mr. Kissinger said.

The Americans released in Hanoi would probably be flown to Vientiane, the administrative capital of Laos, in the first leg of their long journey home.

The release will match the pace of the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam. All prisoners are to be freed within 60 days of the signing of the agreement, or by March 28. Mr. Kissinger said he expected the prisoners would be released in roughly equal groups at intervals of about two weeks.

Details in a Protocol

Details for release of prisoners were contained in a five-page protocol or annex, to the peace agreement made public today.

The protocol covers the release of civilian as well as military prisoners on both sides and provides that those seriously ill, wounded, maimed and old be

returned first. After that, the prisoners can be released either on the basis of the length of their captivity or to close the prison they are held in.

Both the basic agreement and the accompanying protocol differentiate between military persons held by the two sides and civilians held by the Saigon Government.

Drawing this distinction, according to Mr. Kissinger, provided one of the most controversial points in the negotiation, with North Vietnam trying to link release of the civilian political prisoners held by South Vietnam to its release of American military and civilian personnel.

Eventually, according to Mr. Kissinger, Hanoi yielded on this point, agreeing to unconditional release of all military prisoners within 60 days, while the Saigon Government and the Vietcong, "will do their utmost to resolve" the question of releasing the civilian prisoners held by South Vietnam within 90 days after the cease-fire.

Under the protocol, on Saturday both sides must provide complete lists of prisoners they hold. This should provide the first definitive information on the exact number of prisoners held by the Communist side in North and South Vietnam and in Laos.

The Defense Department listed 473 prisoners held in

North Vietnam as of Jan. 13. In an informal list submitted some two years ago through antiwar groups and since periodically revised, North Vietnam has said it holds 40 to 45 fewer prisoners than listed by the Pentagon.

In part, the discrepancy arises because of a North Vietnamese report that about 20 of the prisoners listed by the Pentagon have died.

The Hanoi Government also has contended that it has no information on 20 to 25 others listed as prisoners by the Pentagon.

The Defense Department also lists 108 captured in South Vietnam and six in Laos, bringing its prisoner list to 587.

Because of lack of information, however, there is considerable uncertainty about the

number of prisoners held in South Vietnam and Laos.

No list of prisoners has been published by the Vietcong forces, which presumably hold the Americans in South Vietnam. Only about half of the 108 listed by the Defense Department as prisoners in South Vietnam have been identified directly, through letters or broadcasts by the prisoners.

The remainder are listed as prisoners by the Pentagon because of the circumstances of their loss, such as being seen led away by captors or through reports supplied by escaped prisoners.

Little Data on Laos

In the case of Laos, little information is available but the State and Defense department officials believe the number probably is higher than the six listed by the Pentagon.

Mr. Kissinger said he had been informed by the Communist side that no American prisoners were held in Cambodia.

In addition to the military prisoners, the State Department says that 51 American civilians have been captured in Indochina, mostly in South Vietnam.

Also, the Defense Department listed 1,335 men missing in action as of Jan. 13—515 in North Vietnam, 505 in South Vietnam and 315 in Laos. Under the agreement, North Vietnam and its allies must attempt to account for all the missing in action—an accounting that the Defense Department plans to check through returned prisoners and through inspections of grave sites by neutral observers.

Under the protocol, the places for repatriation of prisoners are to have been determined by a four-party joint military commission to be established once the agreement is signed on Saturday.

The release will be overseen by the joint military commission as well as by a new international control commission, and the protocol provides for inspection of prison camps by Red Cross groups to assure that prisoners are treated humanely until they are released.

The Defense Department has drawn up detailed procedures for the return and rehabilitation of the prisoners, down to the tailoring of new uniforms for them.

From the moment the prisoners are released, they will come under Operation Homecoming, an elaborate plan, once known as Egress Recap.

From the repatriation center, such as Vientiane, they will be flown by American military transports to a medical processing center at Clark Field,

north of Manila in the Philippines. After medical treatment and questioning they will be flown in specially equipped planes—with a bunk and a chair for each man—to military hospitals in the United States for reunions with their families.

