

Tight Secrecy on Pueblo Is Maintained in Seoul

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SEOUL, South Korea, Dec. 20 —Negotiations between the United States and North Korea over the release of the Pueblo crew remain cloaked in a thick mantle of secrecy, although reports continued today that the talks were nearing a climax. The two sides now have met 27 times to discuss the matter since North Korean gunboats seized the United States intelligence ship and its 83-man crew off the port of Wonsan last Jan. 23. But almost no official information about the form and substance of these meetings has been given by the United States Government or by the North Koreans.

The American refusal to discuss the Pueblo negotiations has been based largely on concern that such disclosure would

compromise efforts to free the surviving 82 crew members. One man died from injuries incurred when the ship was seized.

One result of this policy of silence, however, has been a series of leaks from South Korean Government and intelligence officials and, more recently, from officials in Washington.

These sources have been reporting that the United States is ready to issue an apology for an alleged violation of North Korean territorial waters —perhaps the wording used will be “contiguous waters”—and that the release of the Pueblo crew is imminent.

The negotiations on the Pueblo are being conducted in Panmunjom in the same blue building on the demarcation line between North and South Korea in which officials repre-

sented the United Nations Command and North Korea have been confronting each other in meetings of the Military Armistice Commission with frustrating regularity in the fifteen and a half years since the halt of hostilities in the Korean war.

It is almost universally believed among South Korean observers that the United States agreed in principle to make an apology to North Korea as early as last May. However, these sources say that a variety of factors prevented an early release of the Pueblo crew.

One was the United States’ efforts to make its apology mild and ambiguous, perhaps issued in the form of “regrets.” This was said to be unacceptable to the North Koreans.

Pyongyang’s Terms Tougher
Another difficulty, it is believed, was the continued esca-

lation of conditions by the Pyongyang regime. The United States could not, for example, accede to a demand that all military personnel and equipment sent into South Korea in the big buildup of strength since last January be withdrawn.

Finally, the South Korean Government was said to have made difficulties by urging the United States not to apologize at all. Seoul feared that the North would take an apology as a sign of weakness and be encouraged in its aggressive designs.

Now the word going through Seoul is that the two sides have agreed on a formula for the release of the Pueblo men. Their return is said to be only a question of time and working out details of the transfer.

It may be true. But American officials in Seoul are adhering to their policy of total silence.