

Tactic for Release Of Pueblo Men Seen

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Some officials of the Johnson Administration believe that the key to obtaining freedom for the 82 Pueblo crewmen may be two costly fish-processing ships being built for North Korea in the Netherlands.

American agents have been in Rotterdam, ostentatiously showing unusual interest in these ships, in part to raise some apprehension in North Korea that one or both of the vessels might be seized on their trip to the Far East.

The Pueblo crewmen were captured when their electronic intelligence ship was seized by

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North Koreans off the port of Wonsan, in what the United States called an "act of piracy," last January. Since that incident, North Korea has kept its sizable fishing fleet in its own territorial waters, apparently fearful that some of its vessels might be seized in retaliation.

The first of two large fish factory ships ordered from a Dutch shipbuilder about a year ago is now nearly ready for delivery. A North Korean captain and crew are in Rotterdam preparing to sail it, over a 30-day period to their homeland.

Officials here point out that the United States has made no explicit threats to seize the vessel. Indeed, no such decision has been made. But some officials are hopeful that, in view of the implied risk, North Korea will now move to release the Pueblo crewmen.

"North Korea has already milked about as much propaganda from the seizure as it can expect," one United States official said. "Rather than run the risk of a black eye, and loss of an expensive vessel on the high seas, it may be willing to turn the Pueblo crewmen back and close the books on the incident."

North Korea asserts that the Pueblo intruded into North Korean territorial waters. It has been insisting, in public and in private, that the United States apologize and promise not to repeat any such intrusion.

Officials close to the negotiations report that the biggest obstacle to a settlement is not the nature of an "apology," so much as the timing of the crewmen's release.

A well-placed source said the Administration believed North Korean leaders would be willing to accept a formal statement "sufficiently ambiguous so they could read it one way and we could read it quite another way." He declined to be more specific.

U.S. Opposes Delay

But the United States has insisted that North Korea agree to turn over the crewmen at the same time and place that the United States hands over a statement, preferably Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.

It is at Panmunjom, site of the signing of the 1953 armistice ending the Korean war, that the Military Armistice Commission, headed by United States and North Korean military officers, holds its meetings. Unofficial contacts concerning the Pueblo have also been held there.

To date, North Korean negotiators have insisted that they must first receive the American statement of apology. Then they will decide when and where to release the Pueblo crew members, they say.

United States officials say Moscow has urged North Korea to come to terms. The Soviet Union, which operates a large fleet of eavesdropping ships all over the world, is said to be "uncomfortable" about the Pueblo precedent. Since that incident two of its ships have been seized and temporarily held, one by Brazil and another by Argentina.

But Russian pressure has not been sufficient. The Soviet Union has not been willing to go so far, officials say, as to threaten to cut off military or economic aid to get its way with Pyongyang.

The fishing industry is said to be very important to North Korea, first because fish is be-

lieved to provide 60 to 70 per cent of the animal protein in the national diet, and second, because fish has in the past constituted an important export item.

But since the Pueblo seizure, North Korea's fishing fleet has been kept in territorial waters that are believed to be "overfished," according to Milan A. Kravanja, foreign fisheries specialist for the Interior Department's Bureau of Commercial Fisheries.

In 1966, Mr. Kravanja says, North Korea reported its catch at about 500,000 metric tons of pollock, mackerel, herring, cod, salmon and flounder. This was up sharply from a low point during the 1950-53 Korean War, but still well below the peak levels reached by Korean fishermen in the years before World War II.

However, in recent years, he says, North Korea, like other Asian fishing nations, has been rapidly building up its fishing fleet and venturing into distant fishing grounds.

To continue such an expansion of its fishing territory, North Korea vitally needs large factory ships that can go out with a fishing fleet and process and deep-freeze the catch. It has one such ship, built in the Netherlands in 1955, and is eager to obtain the two new ones now on order.

In September, 1967, North Korea agreed to pay the Verolme United Shipyards of Rotterdam 50 million guilders (about \$14-million) for a pair of factory ships that could process about 300,000 pounds of fish a day.

Informants say the contract calls for delivery in Rotterdam. The first ship is expected to be turned over in January or February.

Decision Not Yet Made

Some of the delicate questions being studied in Washington are these:

¶If a decision were made to seize the ship, should it be done shortly after the vessel leaves Dutch territorial waters, in mid-course in the Indian Ocean, or just before it reaches North Korea?

¶What might be the consequences if the ship flies a flag other than her own, such as a Polish flag, which North Korean vessels have sometimes utilized?

¶What if the vessel has an escort of Soviet warships?

¶Might the factory ship be shadowed by American warships all the way home, posing an implicit threat of seizure but giving North Korea about 30 days to decide whether to give in and settle the Pueblo issue?

The questions have not yet been answered at the decision-making level. But some officials are hoping that North Korea, rather than waiting for such a confrontation, will see its way clear to reaching an accommodation on the Pueblo matter soon.

To date there have been 25 secret negotiating sessions on the Pueblo question at Panmunjom. In marked contrast to the vituperative public meetings between Maj. Gen. Pak Chung Kuk of North Korea and Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward of the United States over Korean truce violations, the private meetings are said to be "calm and businesslike."