

Residual Force Hinted by Nixon

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Saying he soon may order a speedup in U.S. troop withdrawal, President Nixon has indicated he is aiming to get down to a residual force of 25,000 to 35,000 men in Vietnam well before the November election.

Nixon's hint of a residual force of that size was the first time any senior U.S. official had used such figures in public, although plans in that range were reported unofficially more than two years ago.

The President linked the possibility of a stepup in the troop withdrawal rate to what he said were the "very, very effective" results of last week's bombings of "selected military targets and supply buildup areas" in North Vietnam.

"WELL BEFORE the first of February I will make another withdrawal announcement," Nixon said in a CBS interview last night.

"Our withdrawal will continue on schedule, at least at the present rate, possibly at somewhat a larger rate."

Last November, Nixon ordered another 45,000 men brought home during December and January, to reduce the total U.S. troop commitment in Vietnam to about 139,000 by Feb. 1. At the war's peak, there were 543,500 American servicemen there.

If the December-January average

withdrawal rate of 22,500 men is maintained or increased in the months ahead, the residual-force level indicated by Nixon could be reached by early summer.

ONCE AGAIN, the President emphasized he intends to keep some U.S. troops in Vietnam and airpower in Southeast Asia as long as the North Vietnamese hold American servicemen captive.

He put it this way:

"Our goal is to end the American involvement in Vietnam before the end of this year, and before the election."

"Our preference is to end it by negotiation. If that does not work, we will do it by withdrawal through Vietnamization, but if POWs are retained by North Vietnam, in order to have any bargaining position at all with . . . the North Vietnamese, we will have to continue to retain a residual force in Vietnam, and we will have to continue the possibility of air strikes on the North Vietnamese."

IT WAS IN this speech that Nixon broached the hint about the size he has in mind for the residual force.

"I know some of you and some of your colleagues have pointed out . . . that if when we had 100,000 in Vietnam that had to effect in getting the enemy

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to negotiate on POWs, why would having 25,000 or 35,000 as a residual force have any effect," the President said to his interviewer.

"The answer is: Does the enemy want the United States to withdraw from Vietnam, or doesn't it?"

The President contended the North Vietnamese had rejected the idea of releasing U.S. prisoners in exchange for setting a deadline for withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam.

"The North Vietnamese said deadline for prisoners was no deal," Nixon said. "That was publicly stated."

He said this happened when a U.S. senator met with North Vietnamese officials. Nixon did not name the senator, but is believed to mean Democratic Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, who conferred with Hanoi's diplomats in Paris last September.

At the same time, Nixon disclosed that Dr. Henry Kissinger, his top security adviser, had raised the POW subject with Chinese Premier Chou Enlai on both of Kissinger's visits to Peking.

Nixon also said he had discussed the POWs with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in White House talks.

If there has been no progress by the time he travels to Peking next month and Moscow later this year, Nixon said, "the subjects will again be raised."

Implying secret diplomatic efforts, Nixon said "we have pursued every negotiating channel . . . we have made a number of offers in various channels" in hopes of gaining freedom for U.S. war prisoners.

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