

Hanoi Aide, in Interview, Links Pullout Date and P.O.W. Issue

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PARIS, May 22—Xuan Thuy, North Vietnam's chief negotiator in the Paris peace talks, said yesterday that the question of American prisoners could be "rapidly" and "easily" settled if President Nixon set a date for total United States withdrawal.

"If he does and the date is reasonable," Mr. Thuy said, "then there will be an appropriate response from our side."

But he said he did not believe that the President really intended to withdraw all American forces from South Vietnam. Mr. Nixon's reasons for refusing to set a date, he said, were only a pretext for keeping troops in the country.

Mr. Thuy was interviewed at his delegation's headquarters in Choisy-le-Roi, a Paris suburb. His manner was informal, but in substance he held firmly to the line he has taken in his meetings with Ambassador David K. E. Bruce.

No Specific Commitment

On the prisoner issue Mr. Thuy repeatedly said that it would be solved once the United States proved its intention to withdraw by fixing a date. But he declined, as he has in the peace talks, to make any commitment to specific action on the prisoners.

President Nixon has said he will not set a final date until, first, Hanoi makes a promise on the prisoners and, second, the Saigon Government is able to defend itself. On the prisoner issue, Mr. Nixon said at a news conference on April 29:

"A promise to discuss means nothing from the North Vietnamese. What we need is far more than that. We need action on their part and a commitment on their part with regard to the prisoners."

Mr. Thuy noted that French prisoners taken in what he called the first phase of the Vietnam war had been released after the Geneva Conference ended the fighting in 1954.

"Prisoners are a question for the aftermath of a war," he said. "It is illogical to raise the question in the middle of a war."

But he went on to indicate that North Vietnam understood the concern about the American prisoners and was ready to do something immediately and make an "appropriate response" before the end of hostilities if Mr. Nixon set a withdrawal date.

"But he is unwilling to with-



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Xuan Thuy

draw all forces," Mr. Thuy continued, so he will easily find some pretext not to do so.

"Suppose we now released all the prisoners," Mr. Thuy said. "Mr. Nixon would say, 'Oh, Saigon is not yet strong enough.' or he would say, 'There will be a bloodbath.'"

"He says Saigon must be strong enough to defend itself. How long will that take? With Mr. Nixon's conditions, the problem will never be solved."

'A Reasonable Date'

As for timing, Mr. Thuy indicated that North Vietnam would not expect a withdrawal within a few months.

"It should be a reasonable date," Mr. Thuy said. "Three years, four years, five years would mean nothing. But what I needed is a precise date for the withdrawal of all forces."

During the interview, Mr. Thuy expressed absolute confidence in a military victory by the liberation forces, as he called them, in Cambodia and Laos as well as in South Vietnam. He said, "The outcome of the war is evident now."

He spoke at length about President Nixon's role in the war since taking office two years ago. He said Mr. Nixon had made "three great errors."

Vietnamization 'Root Mistake'

The first mistake, Mr. Thuy said, was the Vietnamization policy of enabling the South Vietnamese to assume an increasing combat role. This policy "instead of ending the war prolonged it," he said, and was "the root mistake."

The aim in South Vietnam, he said, was to "destroy the politi-

cal base of the National Liberation Front and the guerrilla fighters." But he maintained that the action taken toward those ends was really self-defeating because it provoked internal opposition in South Vietnam.

"To carry out pacification," Mr. Thuy said, "Mr. Nixon and Thieu have to jail people, kill them, resettle them. Now they have to press-gang the aged and the very young for troops."

"Mr. Nixon wants to make South Vietnam prosperous. But everyone knows that local handicraft there cannot survive. Prices are rocketing, and only blackmarketeers and people living on American aid prosper."

Charges U.S. Coup in Cambodia

The second mistake, according to Mr. Thieu, was for Mr. Nixon to "stage the coup d'état" that removed Prince Sihanouk from power in Cambodia last year. Communists charges that the United States planned the coup have always been ridiculed in Washington.

"Mr. Nixon thought he could draw Cambodia on to the American side," Mr. Thuy said, "and isolate the revolutionary forces in South Vietnam."

"But on the contrary, he has made Cambodia another battlefield. Now a part of the Saigon army is pinned down in Cambodia, and the U.S. has to send advisers and aid there."

The third mistake that Mr. Thuy attributed to the President was the incursion into Southern Laos this year. He said South Vietnamese troops and American supporting forces had met "bitter defeat" despite "great determination" and extravagant advance claims.

Calls Nixon 'Cruel, Lying'

"These three errors," Mr. Thuy concludes, "prove that Mr. Nixon does not want to engage in genuine negotiations. He only wants to settle the problem by military victory."

Mr. Thuy was then asked whether Hanoi might, nevertheless, take some fresh action on the prisoner question because of the strength of American public feeling. He responded with some bitter words about the President.

"The Vietnamese people think Mr. Nixon is cruel, lying, deliberately engaging in genocide," Mr. Thuy said.

"As a negotiator, I must speak in a way acceptable to the American people—but to the Vietnam people as well."