

U.S. Pressure Reported Behind Saigon's Decision to

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 26—The United States applied firm pressure on the Saigon Government to persuade it to meet all of Hanoi's conditions for the release of 570 disabled North Vietnamese prisoners, informed sources said tonight.

The South Vietnamese, though willing in principle to return the prisoners, had informed the United States that for a variety of reasons they would not be able to meet the release date of June 4 set by the North Vietnamese in response to Saigon's original proposal.

After United States intervention, however, the Saigon Government agreed to go ahead. It

announced this morning that it was ready to accept all of Hanoi's conditions and that the prisoners would be released in a ship-to-ship transfer off the coast east of the demilitarized zone straddling the border between North and South Vietnam. A 24-hour truce will be put into effect within an 18-mile radius of the transfer site.

American officials had feared that failure to meet all of Hanoi's conditions for the release would stir criticism of Saigon in the United States and endanger chances that North Vietnam might reciprocate by releasing some American prisoners. Secretary of State William P. Rogers and other officials saw release of the North Vietnamese as a possible first step leading to the

return of United States and Allied prisoners.

The initiative to release the 570 prisoners came from Saigon on April 29. To the surprise of many officials, Hanoi agreed two weeks later to accept them provided they were returned on June 4 in unarmed civilian ships during a 24-hour truce.

The radio broadcast announcing the acceptance referred to the prisoners "Vietnamese patriots," since Hanoi has never acknowledged that North Vietnamese troops are fighting in South Vietnam.

After the conditions had been laid down by Hanoi, the South Vietnamese told American officials that it was doubtful if all could be met by the June date. The Saigon Government, which had wanted to discuss the matter at the Paris talks,

was also unhappy that Hanoi had merely dictated conditions on the radio without agreeing to negotiations.

Moreover, informed sources said, the South Vietnamese were fearful they would not be able to choose 570 prisoners in so short a time, that they would not be able to find civilian vessels large enough to handle the release and that the International Red Cross would need more time to ask each disabled prisoner whether he in fact wanted to go back to the North.

At this point, American officials here and in Washington became concerned that the whole effort would collapse amid charges of bad faith.

Accordingly, the United States agreed to fly the prisoners from Bienhoa, where they

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are imprisoned, to the coastal city of Danang. Then officials found a large barge owned by a non-American contractor operating in South Vietnam.

Moreover, the International Red Cross agreed to speed its procedures. It had intended to spend from five to 15 minutes with each prisoner to determine whether he agreed to go back. Now the Red Cross is considering a plan to handle the prisoners in groups.

After hearing a tape of the Hanoi broadcast, the prisoners would be asked to raise their hands if they did not want to return. Such a procedure would enable the June 4 deadline to be met, the sources said.

The Red Cross is also expected to fly additional officials to South Vietnam to help with the release.

With such details worked out, the South Vietnamese agreed to meet all of Hanoi's conditions, much to the relief of the United States Government.

In announcing its agreement this morning, South Vietnam's Foreign Ministry expressed regret that Hanoi had failed to respond to another Saigon proposal that 1,200 North Vietnamese prisoners who have been held for more than four years be interned in a neutral country. Saigon had asked that Hanoi propose the country.

The foreign Ministry expressed hope that Hanoi would react to the June 4 release "with some corresponding gesture of goodwill to the moves made by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam."