

## All but 13 of 570 P.O.W.'s Refuse to Return to Hanoi

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 31—Only 13 of the 570 disabled prisoners offered repatriation have agreed to return to North Vietnam, officials said tonight.

The refusal of the rest of the prisoners to go North has placed the United States and the South Vietnamese Governments in an embarrassing position and possibly opened the way for the North Vietnamese to charge the allies with "bad faith" on the sensitive prisoner issue.

The United States had hoped that the release of 570 prisoners would increase world pressure on Hanoi to reciprocate

by releasing at least some American prisoners. With that in mind, American officials had exerted firm pressure to persuade Saigon to meet all of Hanoi's conditions governing the release, scheduled for Friday.

But to the distress of American and South Vietnamese officials, International Red Cross officials who screened the sick and disabled North Vietnamese prisoners could find only 13 willing to return. South Vietnam found an additional 90 disabled prisoners, turning a total of 660 over to the Red Cross

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officials for questioning. Under the Geneva accords, signed by South Vietnam, prisoners may not be repatriated against their will.

Tapes of the Hanoi broadcast agreeing to accept the "Vietnamese patriots" were played for the prisoners and they were specifically asked by Red Cross officials whether they wished to go home.

South Vietnamese officials, angered by the low acceptance rate, plan to announce on Wednesday that they will go ahead with the return of the smaller number. Hanoi had stipulated a ship-to-ship transfer off the coast of the demilitarized zone straddling the border between North and South Vietnam. A 24-hour truce will be put into effect over an 18-mile radius of the transfer site.

Officials said that some prisoners might change their mind before Friday and decide to return, but the total is not expected to change substantially.

The first indication that the screening process was not going well for Saigon came yesterday when a press briefing on release plans was postponed until today. Then spokesmen called off today's session.

### Offer Made April 29

The release of the 570 prisoners would have been the largest of the war. The last such release came in January when 37 North Vietnamese prisoners were repatriated. So far, more than 200 sick and wounded have been returned to Hanoi.

Why so many of the prisoners refused to return to the North could not be ascertained tonight. Some South Vietnamese were saying that the prisoners preferred to stay in the South out of fear of returning home. Others speculated that the prisoners had received word through the grapevine in the prison camp to remain.

Another unanswered question tonight was why South Vietnam had made such a specific offer before having conducted soundings among the prisoners.

The original offer, made on

April 29 by Pham Dang Lam, Saigon's spokesman at the Paris talks, was specific. He said: "We are prepared to repatriate to North Vietnam 570 sick and wounded prisoners of war."

Informed sources said that several weeks ago the South Vietnamese did make some preliminary checks, which also showed only 13 wished to return. The Saigon Government presumably believed, however, that the figure would rise once the Red Cross took over the screening.

Hanoi had surprised American and South Vietnamese officials by accepting the offer just two weeks after it was made. The Hanoi radio set up a series of conditions, including the transfer by unarmed civilian ships, the date of June 4, and the precise location.

At first, South Vietnam was reluctant to agree to the conditions, although willing in principle to return the men. Saigon informed the United States that it would not be able to meet the June 4 date because of the problems of processing the prisoners and finding a boat large enough.

### Method Vexed Saigon

Moreover, South Vietnamese officials were unhappy with the way the matter was handled by Hanoi, which dictated the conditions by radio and refused to discuss details in Paris.

But by then a White House spokesman had announced that the United States was "pleased that the North Vietnamese are taking us up on the unilateral repatriation" and that "we hope the other side will come to realize the prisoners of war are a humanitarian issue."

Fearful that the failure to meet all of Hanoi's conditions would endanger chances of increasing pressure on the North to release some Americans, Washington persuaded Saigon to go ahead with the arrangement as Hanoi suggested. American officials located a barge and the International Red Cross agreed to speed up its processing.

"We certainly would have had more leverage if all 570 went back," said one disappointed official tonight. "Thirteen doesn't help that much."