

The Reluctant P.O.W.'s: Charges,

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GENEVA, June 3 — "Do you agree to being released in the north?"

This was the question, put in French and immediately translated into Vietnamese, that Red Cross officials asked 660 times last Saturday to determine how many disabled Communist prisoners wanted to be released from prisons in South Vietnam and sent to North Vietnam.

The fact that only 13 replied yes, and the remaining 647 said no disappointed United States officials. They had hoped that the release of additional disabled would put pressure on Hanoi to release American and South Vietnamese prisoners.

Secret Orders Alleged

The North Vietnam delegation at the Paris peace conference said that the United States and South Vietnam were "pretending" that only 13 prisoners were willing to accept release, thus implying that the International Committee of the Red Cross had not conducted the poll fairly.

Officials of the all-Swiss International Committee, which has tried throughout the war to obtain permission from North Vietnam to inspect its prison camps, prefer not to discuss whether Hanoi was really displeased with the result.

The South Vietnamese have

already charged that prisoners rejecting release did so on secret orders from North Vietnam, which for some reason they say allowed 13 to answer yes.

A report on the poll is due next week. Meanwhile, sources close to the Red Cross are not in a position to say whether they accept Saigon's explanation. But they see some merit in the further suggestion that Hanoi is determined not to agree to any deal, implicit or otherwise, on exchange of prisoners that would encourage Americans to hope for a compromise peace.

The present situation, it is pointed out here, is quite different from that in the closing

days of the Korean war, when the entire Communist world was embarrassed by the refusal of thousands of North Korean prisoners to accept repatriation. The fighting in that instance had stopped.

In any case, Red Cross officials insisted today that their poll of the disabled prisoners in South Vietnam had been conducted with complete impartiality.

Only One Question

They noted that they took an informal poll last January that accurately forecast the overwhelming vote against release.

This helped inspire cablegrams from the Geneva headquarters last week ordering

Countercharges and Disappointment

Red Cross questioners not to encourage prisoners to say "yes," and, should a prisoner say "no," in no circumstances to ask why.

It was agreed in advance with the South Vietnam Government that the Red Cross delegates would limit themselves to the one question, to be answered yes or no when the prisoners were brought in, one at a time, in the prison camp at Bienhoa, 20 miles north of Saigon.

South Vietnam and United States officials had previously briefed the prisoners, telling them that if they answered no they would remain in prison, sources close to the Red Cross said.

The wording of the one question that could be asked was carefully worked out, for no captured member of the Communist forces had ever admitted that he was a North Vietnamese soldier or came from North

Vietnam. They all insist that they are South Vietnamese patriots who are fighting independently against Saigon.

Hence the question used "release" in the North rather than "repatriation."

Hanoi's Reaction Unclear

For the prisoners, according to reliable sources here, the all-important question was whether Hanoi wanted them to accept release.

The reaction of the North Vietnamese radio to the announcement of their release was not clear: it said that "patriots" who were being held prisoner would be "welcome" but did not say whether all released men would be considered "patriots."

United States and South Vietnamese briefing officers played tape recordings of the broadcasts to the prisoners, sources here said, and also promised that any man who accepted release would be kept segre-

gated from the others, thus protecting him against reprisals in the camp.

According to these sources, however, Hanoi experts such control in South Vietnam prison camps that the prisoners must have been more impressed by its secret orders, which, judging by the outcome, were to vote no.

On the other hand, cases are cited here of disabled Communist prisoners who have rejected release, either because they did not like an uncertain future in North Vietnam or because they simply preferred to stay in South Vietnam.

Last January, for example, two of the 34 disabled Communist prisoners who had been given their release by South Vietnam simply refused to leave. Earlier, in 1968, a larger proportion, 14 out of 40, blended into the population in South Vietnam rather than return North.