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Mystery Of POWs Deepens

Plan to Fly Out 187 Disputed

STOCKHOLM — (UPI) — Scandinavian Airlines System said today it had been approached by a "private person" in West Germany in mid-July about the possibility of flying 187 persons to New York from Laos, but the deal had fallen through.

A Stockholm newspaper said the 187 persons were American war prisoners.

The report first appeared in Dagens Nyheter, a usually reliable Stockholm newspaper with a balanced editorial policy.

It said "Operation Release" would be carried out next Thursday and that the POWs would be flown to Vientiane from Hanoi, "probably with Russian planes," and that they were then to be transferred to an SAS DC3-63 for the trip to New York.

'Private Person'

SAS issued one report saying its West German representatives had been approached by U.S. military authorities for the operation but issued a clarifying statement later saying the U.S. military was not involved and that the person inquiring about the airlift was a "private person" it did not identify.

Knut Hagrup, the SAS president, said tonight the public relations officer who erroneously confirmed the Dagens Nyheter report lacked the background to handle "this sensitive thing

in the middle of the night and no one regrets this incorrect

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statement more than he does now."

The SAS statement said it was never mentioned that the category of passengers was military personnel. A similar report in the Boston Herald-Traveler today on an airlift also did not identify the passengers as war prisoners.

Mystery Deepens

An air of mystery enveloped the entire operation.

The Swedish and the U.S. governments denied any knowledge of the plan.

But the Hanoi delegation at the Paris peace talks stopped short of denying the prisoner release report.

Xuan Thuy, the chief North Vietnamese negotiator in Paris, said the report in Dagens Nyheter was the result of someone's "too fertile imagination."

But he did not use the word "deny" and he also dodged the issue when asked if some prisoner talks were underway other than those at the Paris talks.

Plan Dropped

SAS not only took the request for an airlift seriously but made preliminary plans to send technicians to Vientiane to check airport facilities and make other arrangements for the flight.

Airline sources said SAS was told suddenly the party making the original inquiry was "not interested." The decision to call off the airlift apparently was made before publication in Dagens Nyheter and not because of it.

The only private person known to be personally interested in such an airlift is H. Ross Perot, the Dallas computer multimillionaire.

He has made several trips to Europe and to Laos trying to arrange a release, but his efforts in the past have failed. He also tried and failed to get permission to send Christmas packages to POWs in North Vietnam.

Hanoi's Stand

At any rate, the Communist delegation in Paris stat-

ed again today there would be no prisoner release until President Nixon sets a date for the departure of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

The official SAS statement said that after it was approached by the private person and after verbal contact with its West German division it investigated the technical possibilities of operating such a flight from Vientiane, the capital of Laos, if and when a date was agreed upon and a contract signed.

Denials that the U.S. government was involved came from the White House, the State Department and the U.S. command in Saigon, which said "the U.S. command did not charter such an aircraft and has no knowledge whatsoever of the story."

White House spokesman Ronald Ziegler stated:

"It can be categorically stated that the U.S. government has not been informed of any such plan nor are we participating in negotiating any such plan, and the U.S. government at any level has not requested SAS to proceed as suggested in the Swedish newspaper account."

Confidential

Dagens-Nyheter quoted "confidential sources" as saying the imminent release of the POWs was the result of negotiations late last month between the U.S. "headquarters in Europe" and North Vietnam.

The report said the repatriation originally was to have taken place Aug. 6 but for reasons not stated it was

postponed until Aug. 12. The newspaper said the first contacts between Washington and Hanoi were in late July when the U.S. supreme command in West Germany cabled SAS and asked the airline to provide one of its largest planes for the repatriation.

Held Mixup

A State Department official in Washington said the report appeared to be "a most unfortunate misunderstanding."

He said that apparently there had in fact been an inquiry from the U.S. military in Europe about chartering an SAS aircraft to fly from Vientiane to New York on Aug. 12.

But the official said no charter was ever arranged and the State Department is uncertain why such an inquiry would be made since U.S. officials and government personnel are supposed to travel by U.S. airlines.