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# Denials and Confusion on The POW Release Story

A.P. & U.P.

## Stockholm

A newspaper report that North Vietnam would release 187 prisoners of war next week brought a chorus of denials yesterday from the governments and airline involved but left questions unanswered about what actually happened.

Dagens Nyheter, the largest morning newspaper in Scandinavia, refused to back down and reiterated that the story was correct. Boerje Dahlqvist, general news editor, said the information had been carefully checked.

A spokesman for Scandinavian Airlines System first confirmed the report but later yesterday the company said that was a mistake.

The later official SAS statement said only that a "private person" had asked about the possibility of flying 187 persons from Laos to Rome but later cancelled the request. The private person was not identified.

## REGRET

Knut Hagrup, SAS president, said the public relations man who erroneously confirmed the newspaper report lacked the background to handle "this sensitive" thing in the middle of the night and no one regrets this incorrect statement more than he does.

Hagrup said the private person contacted the SAS representative in Frankfurt, West Germany. He said SAS

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following paragraph, 'routine.'

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did not take the request "too seriously and considered it a routine matter."

NBC News carried an interview last night with an unidentified West German businessman who said he had talked to SAS beginning about two weeks ago as to whether a plane was available and what it would cost.

## UNIDENTIFIED

Only the back of the man's head was shown on the television screen. He was described as having contacts "with both East and West."

"I was not acting for myself," the man said in response to a question. "There is definitely no American organization, neither private nor military, involved." x x

He added that no American organization had any knowledge of his negotiations. He declined, however, to say who was behind him.

When the matter became public, the man told NBC, the negotiations were called off. He added: "No cancellation was needed because no contract had been signed... I'm afraid, due to the unwanted publicity, some of the connections we had may be disturbed."

## OBJECT

He conceded a possibility of reviving the matter once the publicity dies down. He described the negotiations as serious but declared of their object:

"It was not a transfer of United States pilots."

Another SAS spokesman, John Herbert, assistant public relations director, said last night the person who contacted the company first wanted a plane to leave from Hanoi but then settled for one from Vietiane, Laos.

Dagens Nyheter, one of Scandinavia's most respected newspapers, said in its

story quoting "confidential sources" that Operation Release would be carried out next Thursday. The story said the POU S would be released in Hanoi, flown to Vietiane "probably with Russian planes" then put aboard the SAS DC-8-63.

The newspaper sources said the initial contacts between the governments of Washington and Hanoi were made in late July when the U.S. Supreme Command in West Germany cabled SAS

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and asked the company to provide one of its largest planes for the repatriation.

"It is not unlikely that SAS, bowing to external pressure, has found it suitable to downgrade the importance of the flight," Dahlqvist said. "Our information has been very accurate."

Denials or near denials came from the U.S. government in Washington, the U.S. command in Saigon, U.S. Army authorities in Heidelberg, and the North Vietnamese and American delegations to the Vietnam peace talks in Paris.

## DENIAL

White House spokesman Ronald Ziegler said:

"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."

Robert J. McCloskey, a spokesman for the State Department, said the U.S. government had not authorized any private citizen to make a deal for flying U.S. prisoners of war.

Heidelberg? - see below

x x see SF Examiner, 5\* ed, penultimate paragraph.

x x x see SF Examiner, 5\* ed, paragraphs 10, 11, 12.