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Enemy Request

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Red POW Was Freed as Part of Prisoner Swap

N.Y. Times Service

Washington

A North Vietnamese lieutenant who was released yesterday was freed as part of a one-for-one prisoner exchange initiated by the enemy, United States officials said.

These sources said that when the Viet Cong released Staff Sergeant John C. Sexton Jr. three days ago they told him that they expected the United States to reciprocate by releasing a North Vietnamese prisoner.

This was the first time that the enemy had seemed to accept the principle of reciprocity in the exchange of prisoners — long an American objective — and led to some hope that this exchange might lead to others.

American officials cautioned against drawing over-optimistic conclusions, however.

Officially, the United States does not have any enemy prisoners. They are turned over to South Vietnamese authorities upon capture. Yesterday's release was carried out with the approval of Saigon, the American Embassy in Saigon said.

INDICATIONS

News of the release of the North Vietnamese prisoner was first made public by the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, which said that it was "in response to indications that the enemy would welcome such a release at a given time and place."

The embassy declined to describe what these "indications" were, but Washington sources said it was the mes-

sage given to Sexton, who was released in an enemy-controlled area of Cambodia near the South Vietnamese border.

The Washington sources said no contact had been established with the enemy side, but that following the message given to Sexton, a U.S. Army helicopter released the North Vietnamese prisoner at roughly the same place where Sexton had been freed.

An escort of American helicopter gunships was provided in case of enemy ambush, but the area was quiet, the sources said.

In Saigon, the embassy said, "We have no assurance whatsoever at present that

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this reciprocal gesture will lead to the release of additional American prisoners. That, however, is the goal toward which we are working."

The Washington sources said the North Vietnamese officer had been told to inform his side that the allies hoped such exchanges would continue.

MESSAGE

The Defense Department believes that 82 Americans are being held prisoner in South Vietnam, with 520 listed as missing in South Vietnam. The Pentagon says 378 Americans are prisoners in North Vietnam. Hanoi says it holds only 339 Americans.

In addition, several hundred Americans are listed by the Pentagon as "missing" in North Vietnam or in

other parts of Southeast Asia. Altogether, 1500 are believed to be either prisoners or missing.

Sexton, who was captured in South Vietnam on Aug. 12, 1969, was carried on United States government rolls as missing in action for most of this two years of captivity. Washington sources said that his category had recently been changed to that of prisoner of war after a letter had been found that supplied new information.

TALKS

The fate of the Americans held by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese has been a major issue at the Paris peace talks on Vietnam. President Nixon has made release of all American prisoners a condition for the withdrawal of all American forces from South Vietnam.