

Speculation On U.S. Prisoners

Chronicle

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Saigon

The South Vietnamese government announced today it will free 618 Viet Cong prisoners of war Sunday in the biggest single release of the Indochina war.

The Defense Ministry said the release is an amnesty on the occasion of the inauguration of President Nguyen Van Thieu for a second term.

Release of the prisoners coincided with reports from the United States that U. S. senators were told a major breakthrough on the prisoner of war issue might be in the wind.

The Chicago Tribune last night said "some members of the Senate" were told that a Denver, Colo., hospital had been alerted to handle up to 200 American prisoners of war in Vietnam, but that a Pentagon spokesman had denied the report.

RELEASE

All of the Viet Cong prisoners to be released Sunday are South Vietnamese Communists, or Viet Cong, a spokesman said. He said there are no prisoners from North Vietnam involved.

It also was reported that Thieu is expected to make a new peace proposal on South Vietnam's national day Monday.

The spokesman for the Defense Ministry, Lieutenant Colonel Du Thanh Nhut, said the release of the Viet Cong is the biggest of the war.

Nhut said 618 prisoners, 176 of whom are partly disabled, were being released outright

from prisoner of war camps scattered across South Vietnam.

RALLIERS

Another 2320 prisoners, 36 of them disabled, are being given status as ralliers to the government cause under the so-called "Chieu Hoi" program, Nhut said. Under that

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program they must remain in detention camps for up to three months but eventually will be set free.

The Chicago Tribune, carried a Washington report saying that the Senators had been informed that the Army's Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver would receive the POWs "in the near future," and all end-the-war-now activity in Congress would be obsolete when President Nixon made his planned report on Vietnam to the country November 15.

The Tribune said the Fitzsimmons Hospital gave conflicting views and reported Captain Pete Stofflet, the hospital's public information officer, as initially saying in a telephone interview that the arrival of some POWs had been discussed but no date had been set.

Later, the Tribune quoted Stofflet as saying he had conferred with other hospital authorities and the Surgeon General's office in Washington and reported that "we have no word whatsoever on anything coming," the Tribune said.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Jerry Friedheim said in a formal statement, "There is absolutely nothing to the Chicago Tribune story."

"The Department of Defense has no information at all concerning any imminent release of United States prisoners.

"Of course, the military services are always prepared to handle in their hospitals any released prisoners at any time. But there is not tonight any imminent prisoner release," the Pentagon spokesman said.