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S. Viets Ask Exchange of Prisoners

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SAIGON — (AP) — The South Vietnamese government offered today to return 600 disabled North Vietnamese prisoners of war unconditionally. It also announced amnesty for 496 South Vietnamese convicts.

The Foreign Ministry called on Hanoi to propose arrangements for receiving the POWs.

The Foreign Ministry said the clemency was being made on the occasion of Vu Lan, the Buddhist All Soul's Day Festival, which begins tomorrow.

"This is a unilateral decision in accordance with the humanitarian policy of the government of the Republic of Vietnam," the Foreign Ministry said.

Although described officially as a unilateral decision, such proposals in the past have been made in hopes of a reciprocal release of American prisoners of war held by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.

Last Oct. 8, the Viet Cong released the first American prisoners in nearly two years, Sgt. John Sexton Jr., 23, of Warren, Mich.

The Viet Cong indicated they would welcome reciprocation, and three days later the United States and South Vietnam freed a North Vietnamese prisoner. But that was the last prisoner exchange.
