

SAIGON BYPASSES ACCORD IN FREEING MANY PRISONERS

It Disregards Requirement
They Be Turned Over to
North or to Vietcong

CIVILIANS ARE INCLUDED
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Aides of South Talk in Paris
With Communists, Settling
Some Political Points

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By SYLVAN FOX

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 5—The Saigon Government has reportedly released thousands of military and civilian prisoners in the last few days, turning them loose on their own despite provisions of the Paris cease-fire accord requiring that they be turned over to North Vietnam or the Vietcong.

South Vietnamese sources, who disclosed the release, said it involved some 20,000 Communist prisoners of war and a roughly equal number of civilian political prisoners.

An American official confirming the development, said that he thought the total was more like 10,000 and that he believed all those released were political prisoners.

The prisoners were each given 1,200 piasters (about \$2.50) when they were set free, the sources said.

[In Paris, delegates of the Saigon Government and the Vietcong held their first session to prepare for the political negotiations specified in the cease-fire agreement. They said they had agreed on "a certain number of points" and would meet again Wednesday. Page 12.]

Protocol Specifies Return

The protocol to the Paris agreement that deals with prisoners says that "all captured Vietnamese military personnel whether regular or irregular shall be returned to that South Vietnamese party under whose command they served."

It says the Vietcong and the South Vietnamese should exchange lists of civilian political prisoners within 15 days after the signing of the agreement, and "do their utmost" to resolve the problem of civilian detainees within 90 days.

According to informed sources, Saigon preferred to release the Communist war prisoners and let them wander home rather than formally return them to the Vietcong command, as the agreement requires.

Korean Action Recalled

Saigon's action recalled the freeing of prisoners in the closing weeks of the Korean war. In June, 1953, as the armistice agreement was being negotiated, South Korean guards, acting on orders from President Syngman Rhee, allowed 27,000 North Korean prisoners to disappear among the civilian population. These prisoners had reportedly said they did not want to return to North Korea; 23,000 others remained in other camps.

The release, which was hailed by the South Korean people, led to a temporary breakdown in the armistice talks when the North Korean and Chinese negotiators walked out. The armistice was signed about five weeks later—on July 27, 1953.

Speaking of the release of prisoners in South Vietnam, a Government official said those freed had been designated "New Life cadres," meaning that while in captivity they renounced the Communist cause and pledged to support the

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Saigon Government. "Better to release them as New Life cadres than in any prisoner exchange with the Communists," the official added.

As for the civilian detainees set free, an American official said the Saigon Government "knew they were going to have to release them sooner or later and decided 'why not get rid of them?'"

There are no precise figures on the prisoners Saigon holds. According to some estimates, there were about 35,000 Vietcong and North Vietnamese war prisoners in South Vietnamese hands before the reported release began. Estimates of the number of political prisoners range from 60,000 to 125,000.

According to a South Vietnamese police official, about 8,000 political prisoners have been released in the last few days in the Saigon area alone. He said 6,000 more were set free in the northern provinces and another 6,000 elsewhere.

Tet, the Lunar New Year, which has been celebrated for three days beginning Saturday, is a traditional time for amnesties and the release of prisoners.

A South Vietnamese military source said 1,000 war prisoners were turned loose on Jan. 28, the day of the cease-fire, and thousands more have been released since.

Another military source reported that about 100 former prisoners were seen three days ago at a bus station in Cho Lon, the Chinese section of Saigon, seeking transportation to their home provinces.