

Saigon Frees 10,600 VC War Prisoners

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SAIGON, Feb. 7—South Vietnam has set free over the past two weeks 10,600 Vietcong prisoners of war who rallied to the government while they were in custody, an official government spokesman said today.

But he denied that the release of the prisoners was an attempt to circumvent the terms of the Paris peace agreement, which requires that South Vietnamese prisoners of war, whether government or Vietcong, "be returned to that South Vietnamese party under whose command they served" within 60 days.

Pham Duong Hien, director of the government's Public Affairs Center, said all 10,600 had applied in writing for permission to enter the government's "chieu hoi" or "open arms" program and that the applications had been approved by President Thieu on Jan. 25—three days before the cease-fire went into effect but a day after it was announced.

Under the open arms program, Vietcong defectors are permitted to return to their native villages after a period of indoctrination.

Hien said that because the prisoners had been accepted before the cease-fire went into effect, the Saigon government was "in compliance with the cease-fire agreement" in letting them go home, rather than treating them as prisoners of war who had to be sent back into the Vietcong's military ranks.

He labeled as "inaccurate, false and at least incomplete" reports saying that the prisoners have been released in an apparent attempt to circumvent the peace agreement.

Independent South Vietnamese sources and Western

Diplomatic analysts generally confirmed that the number of released prisoners was close to 10,000 and consisted mostly of military prisoners.

But there was a good deal of skepticism about the claim that the 10,600 Vietcong were genuine defectors set free because they had switched sides.

That figure would represent more than a third of all the Vietcong prisoners of war held in government camps as of Jan. 1, and is seven times the number of prisoners set free in the open arms program last year.

One source in the government said Thieu acted because he knew that "to hand these prisoners over to the Communists was to reinforce the Communists' forces," and the government preferred to try to keep them under some measure of control.

Although the prisoners were still in custody at the time prisoner lists were exchanged on Jan. 27, one Western diplomatic source said, they "were not on the list of those to be returned to the other side—presumably because they now support the government."

The release of the Vietcong apparently began the day the cease-fire went into effect, when a planeload of prisoners landed at Saigon's Tansonnhut airbase from a prison island off the coast.

They began turning up around the country a few days later, inspiring some complaints from local officials who regarded them as security risks.

A "subcommission of captured persons" of the Joint Military Commission has been discussing the prisoner release question for the past several days, but it is not known if the Communist delegations have

made an issue of the release of the Vietcong prisoners or even if they were aware of it.

Besides the military prisoners, the Saigon government also holds an estimated 30,000 civilian prisoners, many of whom are in custody for political reasons.

The Paris agreement leaves their fate up to the negotiations between the government and the Vietcong that have just begun. Saigon has said nothing about it other than a routine announcement that 390 were granted amnesty for the lunar new year, a traditional gesture.

American sources who monitor such matters, however, said that a large number, perhaps thousands, of low-level political prisoners have been set free. Many of these were believed to be political suspects who were rounded up in a security drive that accompanied the government's cease-fire preparations last autumn.

There were no reports, either from Vietnamese or U.S. sources, of the release of any important political figures or of large numbers of Vietcong civilians. But sources in the government said lists of civilians who are known Vietcong cadre are being prepared in preparation for their anticipated release in the near future.