

SFE Examiner Next Releases of POWs May Be More Difficult

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SAIGON — They may bend the rules a bit to get the POW release started.

The lucky men on the first flight out aren't likely to complain. But the departure from Henry Kissinger's script could work to the detriment of those left behind for release later.

The Paris agreement calls for inspection of the POW camps by both the International Commission for control and supervision and Red Cross teams from at least two neutral countries.

Only a little more than a day before the dawn of liber-

Assignment: Peace

ation day, plans for those inspections are still very much unmade.

The freeing of the prisoners is still set to start tomorrow (tonight, U.S. time), but another incident like the stoning of North Vietnamese truce delegates at Ban Me Thuot could derail everything.

Tempers are short on the Joint Military Commission, where representatives of the four belligerents are still

—Turn to Page 5, Col. 1

—From Page 1
working out details of the release.

Late today the Viet Cong's chief delegate, Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, told the International Commission that while he would welcome press coverage of the POW exchange, it would not be possible because other members of the JMC would not agree.

At the same time a press spokesman for the Saigon government was telling

newsmen it would provide limited press transportation to the principal POW exchange site if the JMC agreed to press coverage.

That is how it has gone all week.

The schedule for tomorrow calls for North Vietnam to release about 115 captured American fliers in Hanoi, while the Viet Cong frees 27 of the 125 Americans it is holding prisoner in South Vietnam.

At the same time the South Vietnamese government will trade 2000 Vietnamese Communists for 1000 of its own captured troops.

The Hanoi release is likely to go off more smoothly than the POW exchange in South Vietnam, where intense hostility between the Vietnamese opponents has turned the negotiations into an exercise in pulling teeth.

Besides the hostility, the negotiators must work their way around several diplomatic pretenses.

Since the North Vietnamese pretend they have no troops in South Vietnam, they are standing aside from the discussion of the POW exchange in the South — although many of those freed will be wearing North Vietnamese army uniforms.

For reasons of their own, the South Vietnamese are making no distinction about the POWs they release. Asked whether they would include both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, a spokesman shrugged and remarked, "they're Communists."

Such polarized attitudes make it unlikely that the Paris protocols on prisoner exchange will be carried out to the letter.

The protocols require the ICCS to send a truce-watch team "to each place in Vietnam where the captured persons are being returned."

This the ICCS expects to

do, a spokesman said.

But the protocols call upon the ICCS "during the time of such return" to send inspection teams "to the last detention places from which these persons will be taken to the places of return."

In other words the ICCS is supposed to take a look at the prison camps where the POWs were held.

No plan for this inspection has been made. The International Commission has not even been told where the Viet Cong prison camps are.

The major exchange will take place near the siege-destroyed city of An Loc, in rubber plantation country, 60 miles northwest of Saigon.

There the Communists will release the 27 Americans and trade 700 South Vietnamese POWs for 1000 of their own. (Other exchanges will take place near Pleiku in the Highlands and Dong Ha near the DMZ.)

But it's obvious that the Viet Cong will bring their prisoners to Quan Loi from somewhere else. Where — and how much of a trek the POWs will have to endure — are among the many unanswered questions of the exchange.

The Vietnamese will fly the Communist POWs from Bien Hoa, near Saigon, to the release sites.

American medevac copters will pick up the Americans released at Quan Loi and fly them to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airbase, where a hospital plane will be waiting to take them to Clark Field in the Philippines.

Or, if any are in too bad a shape to make that flight, they will be taken to the nearby U.S. Army Third Field Hospital for emergency care.

The Paris agreement also calls for Red Cross teams from at least two neutral countries to inspect the camps where POWs, both military and civilian, are held — "to contribute to im-

proving the living standard of the captured."

A 12-man Canadian Red Cross team already has arrived — in anticipation of being invited — and a Polish team is on the way.

During the war the South Vietnamese permitted Red Cross inspection of POW camps, after some considerable reluctance.

But if either the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong permit Red Cross inspection of their camps even now, it will be a major first.

Perhaps indicative of how it is likely to go, the head of the Canadian Red Cross team, retired Brig. Gen. Arthur Wrinch, said he still has received no formal invi-

tation to carry out that provision of the agreement.

Nor has he had informal contact with the Joint Military Commission about arranging procedures, although if the inspections are to mean anything time is running out.