

# U.S. to Drop Protest of Delay in POW Release

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SAIGON, Feb. 13 — The United States has decided to let the matter of Monday's delay in the freeing of 27 American prisoners of the Vietcong drop quietly, rather than imperil the future release of American POWs, reliable sources said Tuesday.

There will be no official statement rescinding the U.S. boycott of top-level meetings of the four-party Joint Military Commission announced Monday when the release of the POWs looked doubtful. But the sources said that Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, head of the U.S. delegation to the JMC, expected to attend sessions of the group Wednesday and thereafter.

Presumably, Woodward will nevertheless press the Vietcong delegation for assurances that the next round of POW releases, scheduled in about two weeks, will not be subjected to same delay as the first one.

The turnover of the prisoners at Loc Ninh in the jungles along the Cambodian border was held up for 11 hours because of a dispute over whether the release of the Americans was linked to the

exchange of Vietnamese POWs. The United States insists that the Paris agreement makes clear that there is no such link.

Woodward skipped Monday's meeting of the chiefs of delegations, but none was scheduled for Tuesday. There was, however, a meeting of a committee on captured persons which U.S. officers attended.

Meanwhile, a South Vietnamese government spokesman said today that the Saigon authorities still hope to release 7,000 Communist prisoners of war this week, despite the confusion surrounding the exchanges that has prevailed so far.

The procedure for transfer of Communist POWs to Loc Ninh and pickups of South Vietnamese captives there has settled into a pattern, but planned releases at two other locations in the country are still stalled.

One hundred Communist POWs flown to an airfield near Hue on Monday are still there, according to the spokesman, Lt. Col. Le Trung Hien, because the North Vietnamese and Vietcong officers say they are not ready to receive them. From Pleiku in the Central

Highlands, there has been no further word about the release of South Vietnamese POWs that had been set for Monday and then was called off by the Communist side.

Discussions have been under way in Saigon, Hue and Quangtri, where the POWs are to be turned over, in an effort to settle whatever problems are holding up the return in the northern sector. But there is clear explanation of why the Communists maintain they are not yet ready to receive the prisoners.

In all, the South Vietnamese plan to release 1,058 Commu-

nists, most of them sick or disabled, at Quangtri in the next few days. Hien said that the Communists had specifically asked the captives be turned over as far north as possible.

The Pleiku problem is similarly clouded. Hien said that the Communists have given no explanation for the hang-up beyond saying that units in the field have not yet been informed of the releases.

It is in Loc Ninh, about 75 miles northwest of Saigon, that the South Vietnamese have expected all along to receive and receive most of the captives.

After the first batch of Communist POWs was reassured by their officers on Monday that they were really going to be freed, the shuttle to Loc Ninh got under way.

As of Tuesday evening, 525 Communists had been turned over and the South Vietnamese had received 631 of their own soldiers. When the first increment is completed, Col. Hien said, about 1,000 women POWs will be flown to Loc Ninh. He said it is hoped that by the weekend the total of prisoners freed will reach 7,000.

The South Vietnamese are expecting to get only 1,000 prisoners back this week. A potentially serious dispute has developed among the Vietnamese parties over how many Saigon government soldiers in all are being held captive.

The Communists say the total is only 4,000; the South Vietnamese government says the figure is more like 30,000.

The government says it now holds about 25,000 Communist POWs, since more than 10,000 were quietly let loose in the days just before and after the cease-fire took effect.