

U.S. Says Hanoi Violates Accord by Delaying Prisoners' Release; Bids Rogers Demand Explanation

FEB 28 1973

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Nixon Wants Issue to Get Highest Priority at Paris Parley

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 27—The Nixon Administration accused Hanoi today of violating major provisions of the Vietnam accords by delaying the release of American prisoners of war. President Nixon ordered secretary of State William P. Rogers, who was heading the American delegation to the Vietnam conference in Paris, "to demand clarification" from

U.S. and North Vietnamese positions are on Page 10.

the North Vietnamese delegation, "on a most urgent basis." By phone and by cable, according to the White House, Mr. Rogers was told that the prisoner issue should be given "highest priority before other business is conducted at the conference."

A second group of American prisoners were due for release early this week, in the White House view, but the transfer was delayed indefinitely by the North Vietnamese.

Release Demanded

Reading from notes taken during a long meeting with President Nixon, Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, said, "It is now time for the other side immediately to release the next group of United States prisoners of war."

It was not immediately clear whether the impasse over the prisoners constituted only a short-term problem or threatened the laboriously negotiated Vietnam settlement.

But the vigor of Mr. Ziegler's language suggested that the Administration took the matter with utmost seriousness. And, although the press secretary said that he was "not in a position" to discuss what the United

States might do if the North Vietnamese remained adamant, Administration sources said a number of alternatives were under consideration.

Waiting for Reaction

Among these, the sources said, were a slowdown in American troop withdrawals, a delay in American minesweeping in North Vietnamese harbors and a temporary suspension of discussion about postwar aid to North Vietnam.

"All of these cards are in our hand," said one of the sources. "Whether we decide to play any or all of them depends on what Rogers hears" from the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, in Paris.

Some diplomats interpreted Hanoi's refusal to release the second contingent of prisoners as an effort to use the remaining captives as a lever to gain concessions from the South Vietnamese on such matters as better protection for their rep-

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resentatives in the South and the release of civilian prisoners in the South.

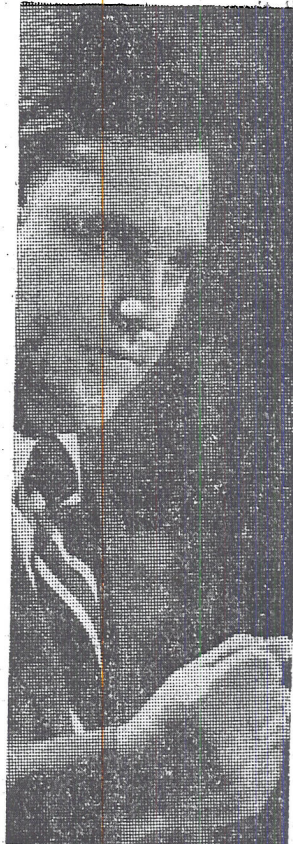
The strong Administration reaction, these diplomats said, could thus be seen as an effort to make plain, once and for all, that the United States was unwilling to link the prisoners to other issues.

Mr. Ziegler spoke to precisely that point at his regular morning briefing when asked about the prisoner problem.

"The United States would not accept during the negotiations and will not accept now the linking of release of American prisoners to any other aspect of the agreement other than the rate of [troop] withdrawal," he said.

"One of the most contentious points of the entire negotiations," he said, "was that there was no relationship between the release of the United States prisoners of war and civilian prisoners held in the South. This point is clearly spelled out in the agreement and clearly spelled out in the protocol."

Article 8 of the agreement deals with release of both civilian and military prisoners but provides, in part, that "the question of the return of Vietnamese civilian personnel captured and detained in South Vietnam will be resolved by the two South Vietnamese parties."



Associated Press
Ronald L. Ziegler, White House press secretary, talking to newsmen

60-Day Limit Set

Article 4 of the protocol on prisoners of war states that repatriation of American prisoners "shall be completed within 60 days of the signing of the agreement at a rate no slower than the withdrawal from South Vietnam of United States forces." Mr. Ziegler cited this provision today.

Article 8 of the protocol on the cease-fire specifies "complete troop withdrawals which shall take place in four phases of 15 days each." It continues, "It is anticipated that the numbers of troops withdrawn in each phase are not likely to be widely different."

Thus, the Administration argues, the logic is clear; if the withdrawal is to take place in four roughly equal increments of 15 days each, and the prisoner release is to take place at the same rate, a second batch of prisoners of about the same size as the first should have been released no later than 30 days after the signing of the accords—in other words, by yesterday.

Of the 23,400 American troops in South Vietnam when the agreement was signed, 11,725—or 49.9 per cent—had been withdrawn by today, according to Pentagon figures. But of the 562 military and civilian prisoners North Vietnam has acknowledged holding, only 163—or 29 per cent—have been repatriated.

Mr. Ziegler, who said that the only word of the delay in prisoner releases had come from a North Vietnamese spokesman in Saigon, called for the release of 120 or more, which would put the total at 283, or 50.4 per cent.

Hanoi Denies Obligation

The North Vietnamese contention, as voiced by Col. Bui Tin in Saigon early today, is that Hanoi has no obligation to return more prisoners until the United States and the South Vietnamese "correctly implement the Paris agreement." Hanoi, to put the matter another way, views the prisoner-release provisions as part of the whole fabric of the agreement, not as a separate matter linked only to the withdrawal of American troops.

Although Mr. Ziegler went to considerable pains to reiterate the American view that there was no link between the prisoners and any issue other than troop withdrawal, he conceded under heavy questioning that the United States had used its "maximum influence" to see that everyone, including the South Vietnamese, lived up to the terms of the agreement.

He implied that Washington had protested to Saigon over such incidents as the attacks on Communist compounds in the South. The attacks were among the points on which Colonel Tin protested in Saigon.