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Minesweeping Lag Tied to POW Issue

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U.S. ships and minesweeping helicopters are "technically" ready to begin clearing North Vietnamese ports of still active underwater mines, the Pentagon said yesterday.

But the Defense Department gave no indication of when minesweeping operations will actually get started in light of North Vietnamese allegations that the United States and South Vietnam were not honoring all parts of the ceasefire and Hanoi's decision to suspend further release of American prisoners of war until the agreements are honored.

There were indications late yesterday, however, that the prisoner deadlock may be settled quickly—perhaps by today. This could remove whatever new obstacle was standing in the way of the long-awaited mine-clearing operation.

Among the several factors cited by Hanoi, through its Vietnam News Agency, in charging the United States and Saigon with failure to honor the cease-fire accords, was an allegation that the United States "delayed and prolonged the removal of mines in territorial waters, ports and waterways in North Vietnam."

U.S. officials dispute this charge, though conceding that Hanoi's perception of what it believed to be a U.S. delay was probably one of North Vietnam's more real concerns, as opposed to other charges that are viewed here as more propagandistic.

The United States maintains that the removal of the mines is a long, complex and dangerous task which must be approached carefully, and which also had to be explained and agreed to in a series of meetings with North Vietnam

which began in Haiphong on Feb. 5.

Yesterday, the Pentagon reported that the latest delay in getting the sweeping started was caused by a North Vietnamese request for time to allow notification to fishermen to stay clear of the areas to be swept.

On the other hand, there are indications that the pace of the mine clearing operation was purposely not the fastest, and was linked to the broader aspects of the cease-fire, especially the release of prisoners. "If those mines were in Baltimore," one Pentagon source suggests, "they would get them out fast."

It is believed that most—though not all—of the thousands of mines dropped by U.S. carrier planes into North Vietnamese waters since last May are now inert, automatically deactivated by timers on the underwater explosives.

Yet, some mines are still active, and there are expected to be other cases where mines that were supposed to be deactivated failed to turn off automatically, thus making the sweeping operation both necessary and tricky.

There is also some suggestion that the Navy waited too long to begin preparing for what is a very major minesweeping task and that there were fewer mine removal experts—a field that had largely been overtaken by more glamorous pursuits in recent years—than was realized.

For the most part, however, the private indication is that the pace of the minesweeping operation was a deliberate one, set at a high level and linked to overall adherence to the terms of the cease-fire, especially the POW release.