

Hanoi Agrees to Free Americans Within Time Specified in Accord;
U.S. Had Suspended Minesweeping

PLEDGE TO ROGERS

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Reassurance in Paris —Pullout of Troops Also Suspended

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 28—The White House said today that North Vietnam had given new assurances that all American prisoners of war would be released within the 60-day period agreed to last month.

The pledge, which was reported by the Presidential press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, raised hopes here and in other capitals that the current delay in the transfer of the prisoners would be short-lived and a crisis would be averted.

But the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, who made the 60-day pledge to Secretary of State William P. Rogers at the Paris conference on Vietnam, did not specify timing of the release of the next contingent. The United States contends that the deadline for this move has passed.

To Be 'Discussed at Once'

According to Mr. Ziegler, Mr. Trinh said only that this "matter would be discussed at once in the Joint Military Commission to work out the detailed arrangements."

The North Vietnamese pledge came as a result of a day of intensive diplomatic activity in Paris. With the conference proper in recess, American, North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese and Viet Cong representatives held a series of meetings some of which last for several hours, in an effort to avoid a breakdown in the peace settlement.

To persuade Hanoi of its seriousness in demanding that about 120 of the 422 remaining American captives be freed at once, the Administration reportedly took additional steps. They were the following:

¶Mr. Rogers was told that he could return to the deliberations of the Paris conference only when arrangements for the release of the next contingent were complete—meaning, Mr. Ziegler said, only when the United States had a list of the prisoners to be transferred and a date for the release.

¶The withdrawal of American troops was temporarily suspended after having proceeded at a rate of 400 a day. The United States argues that prisoners must be freed at the same rate as the withdrawals.

¶After having conducted a first helicopter sweep of mines in the Haiphong area yesterday, the United States minesweeping force steamed out to sea, led by its flagship, the helicopter carrier New Orleans.

The sum of 24 hours of statements by the White House, diplomatic maneuvering in Paris

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and actions in Indochina appeared to be this: A definite lessening of the crisis atmosphere, with the Administration continuing to apply measured pressure to insure that more prisoners would be freed by the end of the week.

A senior White House official said, "We think the outlook is pretty good." Mr. Ziegler, more cautious, said, "We will see what happens."

Officials Are Reticent

Mr. Ziegler replied "no comment" to all questions about troop withdrawals and minesweeping activities, as did Jerry W. Friedheim, the Pentagon spokesman. Mr. Friedheim said "the very intensive and difficult negotiations" in Paris and Saigon made comment unwise.

Other Administration officials provided the details on the halt of withdrawals and minesweeping. They said, among other things, that no aircraft returning American servicemen to the United States had left Saigon today.

Mr. Ziegler once again insisted, citing provisions of the protocols on the cease-fire and on the prisoners, that the freeing of the American captives was connected to no other element of the Vietnam accords except the United States troop withdrawal rate.

He argued, therefore, that North Vietnamese charges of South Vietnamese truce violations were irrelevant to the release of the prisoners.

Without linking the two issues, however, American officials in Paris were reportedly encouraging the Vietnamese parties to work out their problems simultaneously with the resolution of the prisoner question. Mr. Ziegler avoided mentioning this.

The White House was clearly encouraged by the renewed promise of the North Vietnamese to release all American prisoners by March 28—a promise that seemed to cancel a threat voiced by a Hanoi spokesman in Saigon earlier this week to delay the transfer of prisoners indefinitely.

But President Nixon, for reasons of domestic politics as well as diplomacy, wants the prisoners home as soon as possible. So he has insisted that

they be released at the same rate as American troops withdraw.

Roughly 50 per cent of the troops have been pulled out, but only about 30 per cent of the prisoners have been freed.

The unmentioned fear throughout the difficulties with the prisoner release schedule has been that an impasse there could lead to an unravelling of the whole truce.

A continuing series of reported truce violations has heightened the fear. In one such incident today, the Vietcong charged that four members of its delegation to the joint military commission had been ambushed and killed by the South Vietnamese Sunday.

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