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Saigon Frees 500 Communist P.O.W.'s

NYTimes

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 8 (Reuters)—South Vietnam released 500 Communist prisoners of war to the North today, but one of them, a North Vietnamese corporal, refused to cross the border and decided to remain in the South.

The prisoner release, coming after a 10-day delay, marked the elimination of another obstacle in the problem-plagued Vietnam cease-fire.

A total of 6,300 Vietcong and North Vietnamese prisoners of war are to be exchanged for 1,250 South Vietnamese soldiers over the next four or five days.

The corporal who balked at going to the North, according to the South Vietnamese command, was Tinh Van Ky, 24 years old. He changed his mind as he approached the crossing point over the Thach Han River near Quang Tri.

Period of Retraining Due

A command spokesman said that Corporal Ky had asked to be reclassified as a returnee. This means that the North Vietnamese soldier, reported to be the first Communist prisoner who had asked to stay in the South since the cease-fire took effect on Jan. 28, will go through a period of retraining before being released to private life.

No reason was given for the corporal's decision, and the spokesman had no details on how long he had been in captivity or where he had been caught.

Yesterday it seemed that the release of prisoners could be endangered by heavy fighting reported in the Quang Tri area. In a 10-hour infantry and artillery battle six miles southwest of the battered city, Communist gunners fired 1,900 shells on Government positions and mounted three ground attacks.

No Fighting at P.O.W. Sites

But American officials in Saigon reported that there had been no fighting near the prisoner-exchange sites today and said there was no reason that the release of Communist prisoners should not go ahead.

A total of 21,000 Communist prisoners and 4,000 Government soldiers — including the ones in the second phase — remain to be exchanged.

The International Commission for Control and Supervision, meanwhile, pigeonholed its first field report on the fighting at the contested port of Sa Huynh on the central coast of South Vietnam. The Communists are seeking control of Sa Huynh as a point of entry into South Vietnam. The four commission members — Poland, Hungary, Canada and Indonesia — could not agree on whether a complete investigation of the Sa Huynh fighting had been carried out by field teams.