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U.S. 'Switch' May Delay Last POWs

Saigon

A last-minute squabble that could delay the release of the remaining American prisoners of war broke out yesterday between the U.S. and Communist delegations to the four-party Joint Military Commission.

U.S. officials acknowledged that a last-minute switch in instructions from Washington to the U.S. delegation had changed some details in an arrangement already worked out with the Communists and provoked the dispute.

The issues include the responsibility for the handful of U.S. prisoners known to be held in Laos and the timing of the withdrawal of the remaining 6300 U.S. troops, but there is some indication that the dispute is more procedural than substantive.

Late last night the Viet Cong delegation announced it was suspending the release of the remaining U.S. prisoners in its custody until the dispute is resolved. The North Vietnamese reportedly joined in the decision.

OPTIMISM

U.S. officials continued to voice optimism that the 147 remaining U.S. prisoners in Vietnam and Laos would be released by Sunday, as previously announced, or at least by Wednesday, the deadline set in the Paris peace agreement.

This is what happened: Late Wednesday, American and North Vietnamese negotiators agreed that the withdrawal of American troops would be completed by Sunday. In exchange, the Communist delegations were to give the Americans yes-

terday a list of the remaining prisoners, with the times and places of their release, which was to begin tomorrow.

TIMETABLE

Yesterday morning, however, Brigadier General John A. Wickham, deputy chief of the U.S. delegation, delivered to the chiefs of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong delegations a new proposed timetable that would spread the final U.S. troop pullout over four days, from Sunday to Wednesday, and make it simultaneous with the prisoner release.

The withdrawal "will commence," the letter said, "after the U.S. has been provided with a complete list of all U.S. POWs including those held by the Pathet Lao, as well as the date, time and place of release, and after the first group has been physically transferred to U.S. custody." It said the withdrawal would be completed "coincident with the release of all U.S. POWs

held throughout Indochina."

North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front withheld their prisoners ex-

change lists after hearing from Wickham, accusing him of "making an about face" and "changing all that had been agreed on the night before."

A statement by Captain Phuong Nam of the NLF yesterday said there was "no article in the Paris agreement that would justify" the U.S. demand for release of prisoners held "throughout Indochina."

A spokesman for the American delegation said Wickham's letter was an attempt to formalize "an understanding between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho," North Vietnam's chief negotiator at Paris, about prisoners held in Laos.

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23 MARCH 73