

Dispute on P.O.W.'s Still Snags Releases

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By SYLVAN FOX
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Saturday, March 24—The United States and the Communists remained deadlocked today in a dispute over the release of the final group of American prisoners of war.

The dispute centered on the United States demand for the release not only of the 138 Americans still held by the Communists in North and South Vietnam but also of nine Americans held by the Pathet Lao in Laos.

The Communists have publicly rejected the American demand, asserting that the linking of the prisoners in Laos with those in Vietnam was "illogical" and a violation of the Paris peace agreement.

Earlier in the week it had

Continued on Page 2, Column 3

been expected that the freeing of the last American war prisoners would take place this weekend. Under the Paris accord, the deadline for the last releases—and for the withdrawal of the last American troops in Vietnam—is Wednesday, the 60th day after the signing of the peace agreements.

Troop Withdrawal Halted

Because of the deadlock, the withdrawal of the 6,000 or so American military personnel remaining in Vietnam has been halted.

As the dispute over the prisoners continued, the United States charged that the Communists were violating the peace agreement signed in Paris on Jan. 27.

It said it had evidence to confirm the presence of a new missile site in Khe Sanh a former United States base now in Communist hands in the extreme northwest of South Vietnam.

"This new site contains two operational missiles, associated radar and other support equipment a United States official quoted Brig. Gen. John A. Wickham Jr., the deputy chief United States delegate to the "Four-party" Joint Military Commission, as saying. "The United States protests this violation of the agreement and reserves the right to take necessary action."

General Wickham did not say what such action might be but the presumption was that he was referring to air attack either by Americans or South Vietnamese.

Late last month the Saigon Government and the United States accused the Communists

of installing three missile sites at Khe Sanh in violation of the cease-fire.

Although a request by the United States to the International Control Commission for an investigation produced no action, the missiles were subsequently withdrawn by the North Vietnamese, according to United States and South Vietnamese sources.

The United States said yesterday that the new missile site was about 800 yards east of the old sites.

The American accusation was made at a meeting of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission that failed to break the deadlock over the prisoner release.

"There was no movement on either side," an American source said after the meeting, which lasted nearly four hours, had ended.

'Private Understanding' Cited

Behind the prisoner dispute lies a tangled web of assertions by both sides.

According to the United States, Col. Luu Van Loi, North Vietnam's deputy chief representative to the Joint Military Commission, said on Wednesday that the last American prisoners would be released by tomorrow if the United States completed its troop withdrawal by the same time. Colonel Loi is said to have privately assured American officials that North Vietnam would arrange for the release not only of the Americans held in Vietnam but also of those imprisoned in Laos.

This assurance, the Americans say, conforms to a "private understanding" reached between Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho when they negotiated the peace agreement.

Later on Wednesday, Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, the chief United States delegate to the Joint Military Commission, sent a letter to the North Vietnamese agreeing to the plan. But he said that by 10 A.M. Thursday, he had to have a list of all United States prisoners to be released. He said he needed the list by then so that the United States could obtain planes to fly the remaining United States troops out of Vietnam by tomorrow.

In his letter, General Woodward outlined the proposed schedule for the withdrawal of the remaining United States troops from Vietnam, ending with the last departure tomorrow. He made no mention of American prisoners held in Laos.

Second Letter Sent

The next day, however, General Wickham sent the Communists another letter, demanding that the Communists provide the United States with a list of prisoners held in Laos and the time and place of their release.

In this letter, General Wickham revised the timetable for the withdrawal of American troops to extend it through Wednesday. He also made the resumption of the withdrawal contingent on receipt of "a complete list of all United States prisoners of war includ-

ing those held by the Pathet Lao as well as the date, time and place of release."

General Wickham added that the troop withdrawal would not resume until "after the first group of prisoners of war had been physically transferred to United States custody."

A United States official said the second letter had been sent "after further reflection" on the status of the prisoners in Laos. "The letter sought to nail down this question," he said.

There were also indications that the letter had been ordered from Washington in an attempt to get on record Colonel Loi's oral assurances that the North Vietnamese would "arrange" for the release of the prisoners held by the Pathet Lao.

Commitment Denied

The Communists have never acknowledged Colonel Loi's commitment. They insist that General Wickham's letter Thursday imposed "new conditions" and they assert that there is no provision in the Paris agreement linking the prisoners in Laos with those held in Vietnam.

"The release of United States military personnel captured in Laos does not fall under the jurisdiction of the agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam," said General Le Quang Hoa, North Vietnam's chief delegate to the Joint Military Commission.

According to American sources, it would take about three days to withdraw the remaining United States forces from Vietnam.

* 21 MAR
** SEE SECTION
23 MAR 73