

## Pullout Delay

# Nixon Stands Firm on POWs Held in Laos

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President Nixon reacted yesterday to Communist foot-dragging on the freeing of the final nine U.S. prisoners of war, captured in Laos, by strongly reaffirming that American troops will remain in Vietnam until all American POWs in Indochina are released.

At the same time, in a statement from presidential Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler, Mr. Nixon said that unless those nine are freed by the Wednesday deadline, Hanoi will have failed to comply with both the formal, broad Vietnam peace agreement and its informal promise to see that the nine Americans held by the Communist Pathet Lao are released.

In effect, Mr. Nixon tied the nine men — seven military and two missionaries, according to State Department officials — to U.S. troop withdrawals just as if they had been captured in North or South Vietnam rather than in Laos.

The implication was that unless the nine are freed by Wednesday, along with 139 other Americans in the final batch of U.S. POWs, all other provisions of the peace

agreement — including U.S. willingness to help in Hanoi's economic recovery — will be jeopardized.

In Saigon today, the U.S. delegation to the four party Joint Military Commission relayed to North Vietnam and the Viet Cong President Nixon's message on American troop withdrawal.

At a meeting of the chiefs of delegations to the commission, the senior U.S. representative, Major General Gilbert H. Woodward, referred to the White House statement issued yesterday and told the Communist delegations:

"There will be no further withdrawals of U.S. forces until U.S. and free world personnel are returned to us."

The nine men in Laos were not covered in the formal U.S.-Vietnamese agreement. But Mr. Nixon and his

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assistant, Henry Kissinger, said from the start that Hanoi had promised their release within the same 60-day period of American withdrawal and U.S. POW release in Vietnam. This period ends Wednesday.

About 6000 U.S. troops remain in Vietnam, the White House estimated yesterday.

The President's statement followed word from Saigon that the Viet Cong will free their final 32 American prisoners today and that Hanoi will free its last 107 tomorrow and Wednesday. Ignored in the Communist lists were the nine in Laos.

Earlier, North Vietnam had said that the Pathet Lao agreed to free the nine but no time or place was set.

Another complication in the release of the last American prisoners from the Vietnam war was the Viet Cong demand, made when it presented its lists of U.S. prisoners, that the 159 Marine guards at the U.S. embassy in Saigon be withdrawn from the country at the same time that the 825 U.S. officers who form the U.S. team to the Joint Military Commission.

The U.S. has refused this demand.