

Saigon Frees 200 Prisoners In First Exchange in 6 Months

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BIEN HOA, South Vietnam, Feb. 8 — The Saigon Government released 200 prisoners today in a resumption of the prisoner exchange that had been suspended for six months.

All but one were flown by helicopter to the Vietcong-controlled town of Loc Ninh, 75 miles north of Saigon. The Saigon command said a 49-year-old woman named Vo Thi Ty had asked to be released on the Government side and was flown back to the capital, 20 miles south of the Bien Hoa air base.

Over the next three weeks, the Vietcong are scheduled to release 410 Government prisoners that they say they hold, and the Government is to free 3,306 left imprisoned after today.

Both sides, however, admit to having taken numerous prisoners since the cease-fire of January, 1973, and these are not technically included in the exchange, nor are they specifically covered by the cease-fire agreement.

The prisoners released to the Communists today were mostly young men—civilians who had worked for the Vietcong, the Government said. They were being freed after a six-month deadlock that had halted the prisoner exchanges envisioned by the Paris agreement.

Most appeared healthy, marked contrast with previous exchanges in which weak and injured women, some with infants, fainted or lapsed into

convulsions during the long wait for the flight to Loc Ninh.

They were mostly dressed in worn, patched peasant garb, their heads covered with rags or towels against the sun. Some, especially the few women and boys, averted their faces from the newsmen's camera.

The prisoners did not permit themselves smiles. A helicopter pilot said that he smiled at two of his passengers, who began to smile back, then stopped themselves.

At Loc Ninh, the pilot said, the prisoners emerged from the helicopters walking slowly toward Vietcong officials who waited about 100 yards away. Then they finally smiled. It was an orderly reception, the pilot said, with a crowd and a platform and many banners.

Behind the Delay

Under the Paris accord, the exchange of prisoners was to have been completed by last April, but it has been delayed several times by disputes over procedures, the number of prisoners held and who should be released.

Some officials in the International Commission of Control and Supervision saw in the renewed exchange a sign that tensions between the Vietcong and the Saigon Government might ease.

However, as the prisoners awaited here for transportation to the place of release, jet planes loaded with bombs climbed in pairs from the runways and returned minutes later with their bomb racks empty.

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