

N. Vietnam Returns 12 U.S. Bodies

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SAIGON, March 6 — U.S. military officials flew to Hanoi from Thailand today and recovered the remains of 12 American prisoners of war who had died in captivity in North Vietnam.

Analysts here see Hanoi's decision to turn over the remains after long, fruitless negotiations on the issue as an attempt to improve relations with the United States in a possible effort to obtain economic aid, as provided for in the January 1973 Paris peace accord.

Such an effort would be consistent with Hanoi's apparent decision to pursue economic reconstruction of North Vietnam while holding off, at least temporarily, on any major military offensives in the South.

Article 21 of the 1973 cease-fire agreement says the United States will contribute "to postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and throughout Indochina."

Talks on this question were suspended last summer in Paris, and no progress has been reported since.

Now, analysts think, Hanoi may wish to demonstrate that it is adhering to the cease-fire agreement by cooperating on the issue of dead and missing servicemen — thus possibly increasing its chances for U.S. economic aid.

Top Hanoi negotiator Le Duc Tho brought along a large number of economic advisers when he met with U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger in Paris in December — an apparent indication that he had hoped for a detailed economic discussion.

Whether or not that talk took place is unknown, but analysts here think it unlikely.

The meeting in Hanoi today took place a week after an apparently deliberate ambush in South Vietnam of an unarmed American body search team, which resembled the one that went to Hanoi today.

Both teams were from the U.S. Joint Casualty Resolution Center in Thailand which searches for men missing in action under terms of the 1973 cease-fire.

Analysts here call Hanoi's decision to turn over the 12 bodies today as a small gesture, perhaps designed to "sweeten the atmosphere." But deeper significance of the move cannot be gauged until it is learned whether more serious initiatives will follow.

Today, the American officials, led by Brig. Gen. Joseph R. Ulatoski, commander of the casualty resolution center, were allowed to recover 12 of the 23 remains of POWs known to have died in captivity in Hanoi.

Vietnamese sources here said today that the other 11 POW bodies, plus those of a pilot who was shot down and killed over Hanoi, will be returned to U.S. officials in the near future. But there was no official confirmation of this pledge.

The remains were turned over to the Americans, who arrived in two C-130 transports, after a stop in Saigon, at Gialam Airport in Hanoi.

The bodies were then flown back to Thailand for identification. Their identities were announced after next of kin were notified, and the remains will be then shipped to their families, a U.S. spokesman said.

Since the cease-fire almost 15 months ago, remains of 32 dead Americans have been recovered, all in South Vietnam.

There are still about 2,400 American soldiers and civilians killed and missing in action throughout Indochina that the Joint Casualty Resolution Center is seeking to account for, the U.S. spokesman said.

Today's recovery of remains comes after sharp criticism of Hanoi by U.S. Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) for its "indefensible" refusal to account for American servicemen missing in Vietnam.

It also comes on the last day of a three-week exchange of prisoners between Saigon and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (Vietcong).

Saigon turned over more than 3,500 prisoners, mostly civilians, to the Vietcong and received 410 of its own soldiers and 226 civilians in return.

Analysts here think the prisoner exchange, which came after long, bitter negotiations, may be another indication of the Communists' desire to appear to be operating within the provisions of the cease-fire agreement.

The exchange, which has gone smoothly despite much squabbling, supposedly clears prisons on both sides of military and civilian prisoners of war.

In another development, Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Rush arrived in Saigon today to confer with U.S. and Vietnamese officials, including President Nguyen Van Thieu. Rush is on a tour of several Southeast Asian countries.