

POWS

# Missing Americans: Hanoi Drops a Hint

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WASHINGTON, March 13 —

In an exchange of letters between North Vietnam's Foreign Minister and Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Hanoi has indicated publicly for the first time that it has information about Americans listed as missing in action in Southeast Asia.

Even though almost all of the estimated 1,300 men are presumed by most Administration officials and Congressional experts, to have died, their fates remain a highly volatile and emotional issue in Washington.

The letter, from Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh, also made clear that Hanoi would not release any of this information until the United

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States forced President Nguyen Van Thieu out of office in South Vietnam and stopped providing military aid to Saigon.

Hanoi's negotiating tactic in the past had been to make the release of American prisoners of war contingent upon the complete withdrawal of United States forces from South Vietnam.

Mr. Kennedy had written to Mr. Trinh on Dec. 18, 1974, asking for information about the missing Americans as part of the dialogue with Hanoi begun by his staff more than a year before. Mr. Trinh's response was dated Jan. 21, 1975.

Asked why Mr. Kennedy delayed the release of the Trinh letter until now, Dale DeHaan, head of Mr. Kennedy's staff in the Senate Judiciary Committee subcommittee on refugees, said that the letter had not been received "until about mid-February," and that "official copies and translations" were not received and completed until the last few days. Mr. DeHaan said that Mr. Kennedy was shown the letter only yesterday.

In a statement, Mr. Kennedy welcomed what he called the "good news," but added:

"I deeply regret that no progress is being made on the simple humanitarian issue of making this information available to the families of those still considered missing in action."

The language in the letter from Foreign Minister Trinh was vague. But Mr. DeHaan said that the North Vietnamese had told him privately in March, 1973, that they had information about the missing Americans.

Mr. DeHaan also said that the information he had received in March, 1973, had been passed on to the appropriate Administration officials and to officials of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, a focal group for pressure on Congress and the Administration.

Mr. Trinh's letter said: "In this humane spirit, the DRVN services responsible for getting information about those considered missing in action continue their efforts in the hope that their work will help ease the anguish of the families of those still considered missing."

Administration officials have said they believe that Hanoi is withholding information about Americans missing in action.

Two weeks ago, when a Congressional fact-finding mission met with North Vietnamese representatives in Saigon, all that Hanoi would say publicly on this subject was that an accounting of missing Americans would have to wait until the 1973 Paris accords had been fully carried out.

When taken with the statements made to the Kennedy staff in March 1973, Mr. Trinh's references to "DRVN services" and "continue their efforts" are interpreted by Mr. De Haan as public confirmation of Hanoi's knowledge of the missing men.

Administration officials said today that North Vietnamese and Vietcong representatives had told United States representatives "some time ago" in talks on the subject going on in Saigon that they had additional information about missing Americans.

The Trinh letter added: "The Vietnamese people appreciate the growing trend in the press, political circles and even in the U.S. Congress to urge the U.S. Administration to end its military involvement in South Vietnam and cease its military aid to the Nguyen Van Thieu group."

Such a trend, he continued, "creates favorable conditions for the normalization of relations between our two countries and for a good solution to the question of those still considered missing."

Mr. Kennedy's statement called on Hanoi to reconsider this position and provide the information "in a gesture of goodwill and humanitarian concern."