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Varied Sources Used to Learn of Hanoi POWs

Broadcasts, TV Films and Letters Help U.S. to Discover Fate of Missing Men

BY TOM LAMBERT
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — Some months ago, responding to a discreet American request, a French government official asked a French friend who knows some of North Vietnam's leaders to inquire about the condition of an American war prisoner.

The roundabout request was made. Not long thereafter the North Vietnamese replied: The American was dead.

The reply filtered back to the French official, to the relatives of the dead man and to U.S. officials whose prime task it is to try to obtain release of the prisoners, to find out how many Hanoi holds, how they are, and to get aid to them.

In past months, the U.S. officials obtained copies of East German television and Japanese newsreel films of American prisoners in North Vietnam. The identities of some were established through the films.

Periodically, government monitors pick up voice broadcasts by prisoners from Hanoi, thus establishing their identities.

Lengthy Sessions

In 1968 and 1969, during lengthy debriefing sessions with nine American prisoners freed by Hanoi—the only ones released thus far by the North Vietnamese—the officials were able to confirm that scores of other Americans were being held.

Last month, representatives of some American antiwar groups set up an office in New York City to channel mail between Hanoi-held captives and their relatives in this

country. The mail from Hanoi to date has included letters from 70 American prisoners who earlier had not been permitted to write to their families.

The letters established that the 70 men, many of whom had been listed officially here only as "missing," were indeed captives in North Vietnam.

From such diverse and impermanent sources—nobody can be sure if a man who wrote a letter, or broadcast or was photographed yesterday is alive today—officials here have been trying for five years to piece together a picture of American war prisoners in North Vietnam. Some have been held that long, longer than any American in any other war in this country's history.

The picture is still distressingly unclear and unfinished. And North Vietnam stubbornly refuses to complete it. One reason is that the United States and North Vietnam have totally incompatible views on the issue.

Issue of Humanity

To the United States, the prisoners are an issue of humanity. To North Vietnam, they are pawns to be used politically; hostages to Hanoi's demand for the withdrawal of all American forces from Southeast Asia.

If the picture is widened to include the Vietnam war zone—embracing South and North Vietnam, plus Laos—it becomes even more unclear and incomplete.

Nobody knows how many Americans are prisoners of South Vietnam's Viet Cong guerrillas or the North Vietnamese-dominated Pathet Lao forces in

Laos. The Viet Cong may hold 100. The Pathet Lao figure is a mystery, although about 150 Americans are "missing" in Laos.

As for North Vietnam, the most widely accepted official estimate is that 800 Americans, nearly all airmen, are "missing" in that country, and that perhaps 600 of them are prisoners.

From broadcasts, films, prisoner letters home, listings by released captives and other sources, U.S. officials have identified about 350 of the 600. Of the 350, only some 170 have been permitted to write intermittently to their relatives. Little is known about the other 180.

Although letters are priceless for a prisoner's relatives—in establishing that he is alive—they tell little. They concentrate, naturally, on personal matters—the captive's health, greetings to his family—and not on prisoner camp conditions or fellow prisoners.

The letters are not censored, in that written words are not stricken. But it is understood the prisoners must submit drafts of their letters to North Vietnamese officials. If the drafts are approved, the prisoners copy them on a prescribed, five by seven-inch letter form. It has space for six lines of writing.

Except for released prisoner reports, little is known about how the captives are treated or where they are held in North Vietnam. There is one camp in the North Vietnamese capital—prisoners call it the "Hanoi Hilton." And there are believed to be several prisoner camps outside Hanoi.

The North Vietnamese insist the prisoners are receiving humane treatment, but they have twice qualified that assertion.

Humane treatment is granted all prisoners, Hanoi Radio said on two occasions, except those

"who do not comply with the discipline of the camps, or who commit acts detrimental to the security of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam."

Requests Ignored

The North Vietnamese have ignored American and International Red Cross requests for explanation of the kinds of behavior that lead to punishment.

"They seem to have a kind of 'Catch-22' meaninglessness," one official observed, "in that North Vietnam can interpret them any way it chooses while we don't even know what they are."

North Vietnam has rejected American requests for lists of the captives, and relatives' requests about individual prisoners. It has refused to permit Red Cross representatives, even Red Cross organizations from Communist countries, to visit the prisoners and check on their condition.

The North Vietnamese Red Cross refuses even to discuss the issue of American war prisoners, saying they are the responsibility of the Defense Ministry and the Hanoi regime, which labels the captives "war criminals."

While pressing primarily for the prisoners' immediate release, some officials here are positive they will all be freed until a war settlement is concluded. This deduction stems in good part from North Vietnam's replies to some relatives who have asked for details about individual prisoners.

The North Vietnamese have said, in effect, "go home and join the campaign to end the war, and when the war is settled the prisoners will be freed."

First Years

In the first years that Americans were lost in North Vietnam, the official U.S. effort was to obtain information about them—whether they were prisoners, how they were being treated, and so on.

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The first major campaign for release of the prisoners began shortly after the United States stopped bombing North Vietnam in November, 1968.

Encouraged by a Moscow radio broadcast that hinted the captives might be freed, Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, former President Johnson's chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks, began pressing the North Vietnamese to free the prisoners. He tried unsuccessfully to enlist the Russians to help him.

When President Nixon named Henry Cabot Lodge to succeed Harriman, Lodge renewed the campaign, but without results.

Coincidentally, scores of private citizens joined in the November-launched campaign which still continues. Civic clubs, church groups and individuals paid fares for some prisoners' wives to fly to Paris, Rome, India and other states to appeal to the North Vietnamese, the Pope and Indira Gandhi for help in obtaining information about the captives.

Texan H. Ross Perot flew thousands of food parcels to Southeast Asia for the prisoners—Hanoi refused to accept them—and offered, in effect, to ransom all the captives.

Although the prisoner campaign has elicited little if any information about the remaining American captives, it

seems to have had an effect on Hanoi in two ways.

First, North Vietnam has become increasingly testy on the prisoner issue, indicating that the campaign is drawing some attention in Hanoi.

Second, and more importantly from the U.S. view, Hanoi has shown some signs of bending slightly before the pressure on the prisoner issue.

Thus, as noted, Hanoi

has permitted 70 more prisoners recently to write their families.

Hanoi also agreed this past week to permit relatives to ship parcels every other month to prisoners in North Vietnam. Heretofore, Hanoi had accepted parcels only on Christmas, 1968, and Fourth of July and Christmas last year.

The inference is obvious: The United States is going to continue and intensify its campaign for the prisoners' release.