

AFP
1/27/68

PS
FILE / SUBJ.
DATE / SUB-CAT.
1/68

AFP Report

7

Paris AFP in English 1700 GMT 27 Jan 68 E (FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY)

[Text] Hanoi--Bernard- Joseph Gabanes dispatch--The North Vietnamese Government, in a move apparently designed to emphasize its peace overture to the United States, today announced it was releasing three U.S. aviators. An official communique said the three men, whose names were not given, would be released in a humanitarian gesture to mark Vietnam's Tet festival celebrated here on 29 January.

Observers in Hanoi felt certain the government's decision was designed to follow up the peace overture made by Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh on 29 December, when he declared that Hanoi will start talks with the United States if it unconditionally stops bombing North Vietnam.

The AFP correspondent in Hanoi had his own personal grounds for believing that today's announcement was a diplomatic move linked to the foreign minister's statement.

Recently this correspondent was talking with persons who may be described as competent in DRV circles. They asked him what Hanoi could do to intensify its peace overture. In reply, he suggested that the DRV might release an American aviator. This suggestion drew no positive response at the time. In view of this, and because of the nature of the subject, the only course open to the correspondent was to keep silent about the matter.

After today's announcement, it seemed certain that the release of the three men was intended as much more than a humanitarian gesture, though this aspect was the only one mentioned in the communique.

The communique said the men were being freed to mark the Tet festival, in line with the DRV's policy of clemency, and that the measure was taken by leaders of the armed forces in charge of overall political decisions. It added that the three men had behaved correctly during their detention. This was all the communique said.

However, it was undeniable that the move was also a governmental and diplomatic act. It was part of the continuing 29 December peace overture, which, in the eyes of some observers, was almost beginning to take on the dimensions of a peace offensive.

The stages of this offensive would be the following:

- 1--The original 29 December statement by Nguyen Duy Trinh;
- 2--The interview given in mid-January by Mai Van Bo, the DRV's delegate general in Paris who said notably that talks will start after a reasonable period following an unconditional bombing halt;
- 3--Today's announcement of the three men's release, which could be seen as evidence of Hanoi's conciliatory intentions, even though Washington has not yet replied to the statements of Nguyen Duy Trinh and Mai Van Bo.

This is the first time that North Vietnam has released any U.S. airmen. The South Vietnam National Liberation Front--NLF--has released American soldiers captured by its forces in South Vietnam.

However, the NLFSV's gesture was less clear-cut than Hanoi's, since two of the three men released by the NLFSV were Negroes. Foreign opinion may have interpreted their release, to a certain extent, as a propaganda move aimed at the U.S. Negroes, designed to encourage Negro opposition to the Vietnam war. No such interpretation could be placed on today's announcement.

The release of the three airmen was a particularly important concession in North Vietnamese eyes since, for Hanoi, the U.S. aviators cannot be considered prisoners of war because war has never been officially declared between the United States and North Vietnam. For Hanoi, the airmen were simply pirates.

The men's release should also carry some emotional impact for Americans, since U.S. public opinion has always been particularly sensitive about the fate of U.S. men who fell into North Vietnam's hands. It remained to be seen whether today's gesture would help convince Washington that Hanoi's offer to hold talks was sincere.

The answer lies in Washington. In any case, foreign observers in Hanoi believed today's move would increase pressure on President Johnson to halt the bombing and to start the diplomatic process leading to negotiations between Hanoi and Washington.

An interesting sidelight on today's announcement was (?evident). Apparently it showed the DRV was not afraid to reveal the facts about conditions prevailing in camps where U.S. prisoners are kept. At a time like the present, when delicate diplomatic soundings were underway, Hanoi would hardly release three men who, upon their return home, might indignantly denounce conditions in North Vietnam's prison camps.

Meanwhile, there was no indication here as to the route the three men would take to return to the United States.

1/28/68