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THE RELEASE OF NORTH KOREAN PRISONERS OF WAR

The unilateral release of up to 25,000 of the 32,000 North Korean anti-Communist prisoners, apparently on President Rhee's personal responsibility, is one of several possible weapons which the South Korean government has had at its command, short of independent military action, to hamper or block a truce, embarrass the United States, and underline South Korean opposition to an armistice as presently proposed. Other measures also previously noted and which may yet be adopted, include South Korean refusal to sign an armistice, refusal to withdraw ROK troops from the demilitarized zone, withdrawing South Korean troops from the UN Command, and/or employing force against Indian troops.

President Rhee took the greatest exception to the provisions in the UN 25 May proposal which related to the anti-Communist prisoners. Foreign Minister Pyun informed Ambassador Briggs that the proposal was so discouraging that "large numbers of loyal Koreans" would switch to the Communist side in order to avoid an additional six months of imprisonment during which they would be subjected to "brainwashing." He took the position that the prisoners were subjects of the South Korean government, and that the proposal was thus a violation of its sovereignty. These may be the grounds upon which the order for release will be justified, despite the fact that the action was a violation of assurances against unilateral action given by President Rhee as late as 12 June.

The Communists are almost certain to represent Rhee's action as taken in collusion with the UN command. Their propaganda is expected to assert, as it did in mid-May when the UN proposed to release anti-Communist Korean prisoners, that such action undermines the basis of the truce talks and "proves" the UN's lack of good faith. Moreover, they may recess the talks, pending assurances from the UN Command as to its willingness and ability to prevent a further release of prisoners, and in order full to exploit the propaganda potential of the affair.

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It is doubtful, however, that the Communists will allow the talks to break down permanently on this issue. In their previous insistence upon the return of all prisoners, they showed concern not so much with the value of the prisoners themselves as with the loss of prestige involved in the prisoners' refusal to return and the possible effects on the domestic populace of a genuine alternative to continued Communist control. In this case the Communists will be able to represent Rhee's action as continued coercion of prisoners who wanted or would want to be repatriated, and to assert that they are not being freed but are being turned over to a fate worse than death.

Rather than declaring a permanent breakdown of the talks, the Communists will probably choose to wait for Rhee to involve the UN Command in a steadily worsening situation - for example, one in which India, fearing Rhee's possible actions, would refuse to send its troops into Korea for the use of the five-nation custodial commission. The Communists would thus hope to place on the UN the onus for a breakdown. They may well hope that Rhee will go further and will make good on his earlier assertions that he would take unilateral military action against North Korea. In such an event, the military and political position of the UN might be so undermined as to make impossible effective resistance against a fresh Communist attempt to unify Korea by force of arms.

Rhee's action will undoubtedly lead to a drastic decline in his prestige among friendly UN nations. It should be remembered that the UN's mid-May proposal for the release of anti-Communist POW's was met with violent reactions among many US allies, which to a considerable extent brought about the revision of the proposals. In addition, the US will almost certainly be severely criticized for allowing such a situation to develop in view of the imminent signing of a truce. There is also a possibility that the proposed UN greater sanctions statement will be jeopardized, and both India and Switzerland have already indicated that they will reconsider their participation on the neutral commission.

An alarming by-product of the affair is that Rhee's orders were apparently carried out by Maj. Gen. Won Yon-tok, chief of the Provost Marshal General Command. Won is a ready tool of Rhee and a political general without military status except for his personal relationship with Rhee. The affair may undermine the prestige of Chief of Staff Paek Sun-yop whose guards manned the stockades. Paek, who has consistently opposed Rhee's threatened "march to the Yalu", could now become

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discredited and be replaced by a "political general" like Won who would not hesitate to order independent military action if Rhee asked for it. While this latest affair probably represents further South Korean attempts to modify the truce or secure a security pact with the US prior to an armistice, Rhee's emotionalism on the question of unification, coupled with a political general's appointment as chief of staff, might bring the northward march closer to reality than it has been heretofore.

Whether Rhee will take any further unilateral moves will probably depend upon the reactions which follow the prisoner release. Any indication that the US might make further concessions to South Korea would doubtless crystallize the widespread indecision existing there into firm support for Rhee's most extreme demands. This would aid him in his objective of securing major concessions from the US without making corresponding commitments.

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