

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

Dear Mrs. Hanson:

I wanted personally to respond to your recent letter and to the several sets of questions submitted by you and other members of the National League of Families of POWs and MIAs in Southeast Asia.

Let me assure you as strongly as I possibly can that the President and all members of his Administration have placed a high priority on the fate of these men and their families. Let me underline the President's personal commitment by citing an excerpt from his recent statement to the League's national convention in Washington, D. C. on September 28, 1971. In his remarks the President said:

"....I have considered the problem of obtaining the release of our POW's and missing in action as being one that has Presidential priority. I can assure you that every negotiating channel -- and now I will say something here that I am sure all of you will understand -- including many private channels that have not yet been disclosed, have been pursued, are being pursued, and will be pursued.

I can assure you that with regard to this problem, too, that whenever any matter comes to the attention of the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of State, from a Senator or Congressman or the rest, it is brought to my desk and we run out the lead, whatever it may be.... We are doing that, I have personally ordered that, and we will succeed in our goal. That is my commitment that I make to all of you."

As you know this Administration has indeed sought to explore all possible channels and all responsible courses of action. We and the Government of South Vietnam have repeatedly proposed the complete release of all prisoners of war held by all sides. We have proposed

that sick and wounded prisoners and prisoners held in captivity for long periods be interned in a neutral country. We have advocated inspections by neutral observers. We have worked through our representatives at the United Nations and in many third countries and through special efforts such as that of Frank Borman. In addition, the South Vietnamese have with our support on a number of occasions unilaterally released large numbers of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese prisoners of war. And we have attempted the dramatic rescue mission at Son Tay.

Regrettably, the North Vietnamese and their allies have thus far totally rejected all proposals for neutral observers and prisoner releases. Instead they have set unconditional and unacceptable political ransom demands while continuing to violate the commonly accepted humanitarian standards and international conventions of POW treatment.

In spite of the other side's intransigence, however, this Administration will leave no stone unturned in seeking to gain a full accounting, the proper treatment and the early release of all our men.

Let me also assure you that the President has no intention of abandoning these brave men as American troops are withdrawn from South Vietnam under the Administration's Vietnamization program of giving the South Vietnamese the capability to defend themselves against North Vietnam's attack. The President has pledged that American forces will remain in South Vietnam until all of the prisoners have been released and until the South Vietnamese have a reasonable chance to defend themselves against North Vietnam's attack. We hope that North Vietnam's leaders may yet chose the path of negotiation and reciprocity and that they will treat and release the men on a humane basis.

After saying the above, I must also say that I do not believe that either the national interest or the interests of the men would be served by my providing written answers at this time to the series of questions you have forwarded to me. As you indicated in your letter of November 28, 1971, you and the members of the League of Families certainly appreciate the nature of the complex issues involved and of the sensitivity of the meetings we have been able to have during the past year. I believe that these interests are best served and the questions can be more profitably discussed via the frank and confidential discussions we have had in the past. I also believe that we have discussed

a number of these questions during past meetings, and senior Administration officials including the President and the Secretaries of State and Defense have addressed a number of them publicly.

I will be glad to discuss these questions with you at our next meeting. In the meantime, I am sure that my staff and the officials in the Departments of State and Defense who are working on the POW/MIA problem will continue to be available to you.

I join most wholeheartedly in the hope expressed in your letter that together we will be able to rejoice at the success of the President's policy in Vietnam including a full accounting of our missing and the return of our prisoners.

Best regards,

Henry A. Kissinger

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