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Some Vietnam POWs May Be Alive in Russia

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WASHINGTON — Russian President Boris N. Yeltsin said Monday that some U.S. prisoners captured during the Vietnam War were moved to labor camps in the Soviet Union, and he speculated that some may still be alive.

"Our archives have shown that it is true--some of them were transferred to the territory of the former U.S.S.R. and were kept in labor camps," Yeltsin told NBC News in an interview aboard his presidential jet en route from Moscow to Washington. "We don't have complete data and can only surmise that some of them may still be alive."

Yeltsin offered no further details, but his spokesman, Vyacheslav V. Kostikov, later repeated the statement.

"After the Vietnam War, a certain number of (American) military prisoners were in Russia . . .," Kostikov told reporters at the Russian Embassy. "The president and the new democratic government are trying to do their utmost to find those people--to find the memory of those people, because most of them, of course, have already died. Nevertheless, when I asked the president, 'Do you think that some of these people may still be alive?' he said it's not excluded that some of them are still alive."

Most Americans who served in Vietnam would now be in their 40s.

The Russian statements appeared to confirm longstanding allegations that some Americans captured by North Vietnam were shipped to the Soviet Union. But they also seemed to conflict with the findings of a joint U.S.-Russian commission on POWs released only last week.

The commission reported that about 23,000 American POWs were interned in the Soviet Union at the end of World War II but said the only records of Vietnam-era internees it found were of deserters from the U.S. armed forces who had since left Russia.

Yeltsin wrote a letter to the U.S. Senate last week with more information about U.S. POWs, including 12 captured after spy-plane crashes during the Cold War, but said "no data are as yet available" about Americans missing from the Vietnam War.

Earlier this year, two former U.S. intelligence analysts testified to Congress that they believed Vietnam-era POWs with technical specialties were transferred to the Soviet Union for interrogation by the KGB secret police, but the Pentagon has denied having such knowledge.

A White House spokesman, Douglas Davidson, said he does not believe the Bush Administration knew of the Vietnam-era prisoners.

"This is the first I've heard of it," he said.

A State Department official who has been working on the POW issue agreed. "This came completely out of the blue," he said. "The Russians have left open the possibility that some American prisoners are alive, but they have never shown us any evidence of Vietnam War prisoners."

Another Russian official also said Monday that at least one of the estimated 23,000 Americans who came under the control of the Red Army when it liberated German and Japanese prison camps at the end of World War II may still be alive somewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Gen. Dmitri A. Volkogonov, head of a special commission looking into the fate of Americans, said Russian authorities received a letter several days ago from the Ural Mountains saying that an American man was living there. He said his government is investigating and that he hopes to know the truth by the end of the month.

Last week, Russian officials, in conjunction with the meeting between Presidents Yeltsin and Bush this week, confirmed that the prisoners were held in the Soviet Union after the Soviet troops liberated the camps. Most were released a short time later, but the fate of some remains a mystery.

"The fate of some Americans is worthy of Shakespeare's pen, it is so complex," Volkogonov said.

Times staff writer John-Thor Dahlburg contributed to this article.