

No Evidence of American POWs in Russia : Missing: Former U.S. envoy reports less than complete cooperation from Moscow officials.

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MOSCOW — The U.S.-Russian team searching for American prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action has yet to uncover information leading to any living American service personnel, and there are only minuscule chances that such individuals exist here, officials said Thursday.

"I, for one, believe that the probability of finding an American (POW or MIA) in Russia today is close to nil," said Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov, the Russian chairman of the joint commission on the fate of American POWs and MIAs.

Former U.S. Ambassador Malcolm Toon, the commission's American chairman, was only slightly less pessimistic, telling reporters: "I'm not yet ready to make a definite statement on this until the whole thing has been thoroughly investigated. In my three visits to Moscow, I have heard nothing from the officials I talked with, I've seen nothing in the archives that had been available to us that would support the idea that there is a live American POW being held against his will in Russian facilities. And that's all I can say."

His remarks seemed to reflect his belief that some Russian officials have not been forthcoming.

"I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you that we have received less than complete cooperation on the part of some archivists, particularly those related to the KGB and the GRU (military intelligence)," he said. "I recognize that it is not easy for intelligence agencies to open up their files to strangers."

Toon said he "registered a complaint" with President Boris N. Yeltsin about this in a Kremlin meeting Wednesday; the Russian leader said he will guarantee complete access to all archives in the future.

In a June visit to Washington, Yeltsin sent POW-MIA advocates' hopes soaring, telling Congress that "each and every document in each and every (Russian) archive will be examined in order to investigate the fate of every American unaccounted for. As president of Russia, I assure you that, even if one American has been detained in my country and can still be found, I will find him, I will get him back to his family."

Answering Toon's request, Yeltsin pledged to "prepare a definitive statement" on whether any American POWs live in the territory of the former Soviet Union by the end of next month. Yeltsin also gave Toon information from official archives about two innocent Americans executed in the late 1930s as spies under Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

"When President Yeltsin passed these documents to me and read from them, he was very emotional about it," Toon recalled. "He said that those were indeed terrible days. . . . I had three tours of duty in the old Soviet Union. And I could testify from my own personal experience that those were indeed terrible days. I hope that they are over for good."

The Russian government's willingness to open its archives to the POW-MIA commission is one indication of just how much relations have improved between Washington and Moscow. Such an investigation would have been unthinkable until just recently.

The commission, launched in March, has uncovered information about American POWs from World War II who died in Russia; it has information on 49 Americans who ended up in Soviet territory after World War II and later were interned in labor camps; five of the 49 still live in Russia, Ukraine or Belarus, and, though they want to contact relatives, they do not wish to return to America.

The Russians also handed over files on interrogations that occurred in the presence of Soviet agents in China, involving 54 American servicemen captured by Communist forces during the Korean War.

The files also recorded conversations about American POW-MIAs among Stalin, China's Mao Tse-tung and North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung.