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# U.S. Explains Policy Toward Sect

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 26 — The State Department knew very little about the People's Temple community in Guyana, before the mass suicides and killings of last week, and virtually nothing about Jonestown's relations with the Guyanese Government, officials here said today.

While aware of the existence of the colony, the department knew little of its practices or what relationship the Rev. Jim Jones had with Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, they said.

The officials were questioned today about charges by opposition leaders in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, that Mr. Burnham's Government was trying to conceal its links to Jonestown, where at least 900 people died last weekend.

After the deaths, the shortage of such knowledge compounded the State Department's problem of determining how

many people were in the colony and who might have survived.

The United States consular officials in Guyana were always acutely aware that they had no authority to interfere with an American religious establishment, however unorthodox its behavior might be, if it were ostensibly breaking no Guyanese laws, the officials said.

"A consular officer might come away from a Jonestown visit somewhat uneasy at the fervor of the People's Temple members," one official said, "but fervor of itself was not his responsibility and certainly not contrary to the laws of Guyana."

Asked again why consular officers had been unable, during 75 interviews with People's Temple members in Jonestown,

Continued on Page A13, Column 1

# Why State Department Knew Little About Colony

Continued From Page A1

to uncover evidence of repression or to find anyone willing to leave the community, another official said, with feeling:

"Look, the fact that 900 people would kill themselves or allow themselves to be killed on the orders of their leader suggests a degree of conviction or commitment hard to penetrate."

State Department officials pointed out that many American religious organizations have established settlements in various Latin American countries and elsewhere, one of them being the House of Israel in Guyana, a group of blacks adhering to the Jewish faith and led by a

man from Cleveland who professes to be the Prophet Elijah.

"I have seen nothing in any embassy reporting about any personal relationship between Jim Jones and Prime Minister Burnham," said a high-ranking official. He added that he doubted that Ambassador John R. Burke had ever met Mr. Jones.

The officials emphasized that Guyana had been a logical place for Mr. Jones to establish his community in two respects: Both Guyana and the People's Temple are multiracial in character and both are committed to a socialist, cooperative society.

American officials were still pointing out today that, because the largest American helicopters were needed in

Georgetown to shuttle bodies from Jonestown, the United States Army's graves registration squads were only able to begin their work on Wednesday afternoon.

The officials said again that the highest priority for the squads was to identify bodies and place them in bags for removal, and not to count them systematically.

The squads started their task with the bodies lying at the perimeter outside the People's Temple assembly hall, officials said; only as the soldiers worked their way into the hall itself, and found layers and clusters of bodies, did they realized how low the original estimate of Guyanese authorities had been.

Many of the bodies were those of infants and small children, lying under the

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 1978

bodies of their parents, and thus not visible until the top layers were removed, officials said.

Officials denied that American authorities had collaborated with the Guyanese Government in keeping Jonestown off-limits to the press. They said priority had to be given to body removal and to exhaustive searches for survivors because it was then thought that hundreds of people might have fled from Jonestown into the jungle.

A Defense Department official said he understood that Guyanese authorities had restricted press coverage in Jonestown because they feared health contamination problems and believed that scores of reporters at the site would hamper the army's task of identifying and bagging bodies for evacuation.

Until Tuesday at the earliest, Guya-

nese authorities will be completing their questioning of the survivors and clearing for repatriation those whose testimony will not be required for any legal actions that may arise, according to a State Department spokesman, Mary Ann Bader.

Among the 80 survivors are 45 members of the sect who had been in Georgetown at the time of the deaths; 14 members who escaped from Jonestown into the jungle and were rescued, and 19 members who survived the assault on Representative Leo J. Ryan's investigative party, in which Mr. Ryan and four others were slain at the Port Kaituma airstrip on Nov. 18. The latter 19 members had decided to leave Jonestown and accompany Mr. Ryan back to the United States.

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**Thursday in The New York Times**