

Letter From
Guyana

The Story Is Officially Over, but the

GEORGETOWN

ONE DAY LAST week, the banner headlines in Guyana's government-owned morning paper suddenly shifted from the Jonestown tragedy to the shortage of chickens throughout the nation.

In the view of many Guyanese that was the official signal that as far as they were concerned, the Jonestown story was over.

The shopkeepers, the taxi drivers, the hotel clerks and the ordinary people on the streets of Georgetown, who begged foreign journalists for more information, still remain bewildered by all that has happened from the horror of Jonestown itself to the descent of hundreds of foreign journalists on their small country.

And although few groups are more excited to a full explanation, the people of Guyana are the least likely ever to get one.

As in many poor countries, the two major daily papers—the Chronicle and the Citizen—are government-owned. Journalists screen their stories through a "comrade" stationed in their newsroom by the Ministry of Information. The censorship has been heavy in the government papers, although several opposition newspapers seem able to print what they want.

When Rep. Leo Ryan (D-Calif.) first came to the country, the government dailies reported only that he was there for discussions with Guyanese

officials. There was no mention of Jonestown.

A week later, after Ryan and more than 900 others were dead, the papers made no mention of the questions raised in the Guyanese Parliament about how it all happened, about how the weapons used to enforce the suicide order entered the country, or about how Jonestown managed to escape the country's strict currency controls and accumulate a stash of hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of U.S. dollars.

And when questions were posed by reporters, the government's chief spokesman, Information Minister Shirley Field-Ridley, literally fled down hallways of the Parliament building to avoid them. Subsequently she locked herself in her office, refusing to come out.

What little inside information local journalists could dig out often was funneled to foreign reporters. "There's nothing we can do with this," one said. "It would never make it into print."

AT THE HEIGHT of the activity in Guyana, U.S. Embassy officials also began longing for an end to it all. They would reminisce about the way things used to be.

Every new Foreign Service officer sent to Guyana, they said, had on important lesson to learn right away. "If you sent a letter to the State Department that said 'Guyana, S.A.' on it, it

would wind up at the South Africa desk in Washington.

"You had to learn to write 'SOUTH AMERICA' all over it in big letters in order to make sure it got to the right place. They never heard of us up there," said one official.

Homats in Guyana were in Guyana. Hard as the embassy staff tried during the difficult period, efficiency and sensitivity seemed constantly to elude them, especially when they teamed up with the Guyanese government.

Victims of various Jonestown crimes, for example were placed in the same hotel with potential suspects. They glowered at each other for days.

When the white embassy van arrived at Peoples Temple headquarters in Georgetown to pick up a batch of survivors for the trip back to the United States, the highest-ranking U.S. employee on hand was the van's driver, a local chauffeur.

Undoubtedly the most unhappy embassy employe was Stephen Kibble, the press spokesman who normally runs the U.S. library in Georgetown and is unused to dealing with panicked American reporters.

"They made me look like an ass," Kibble wailed one morning. "They made me look like an ass on network television. My 84-year-old grandmother was probably watching."

"They called me a liar. They called me an idiot. They called me an ass and everything else under the sun.

It's one thing to say the United States government isn't doing its job, but why do they have to get so personal about it?"

APART FROM THOSE directly involved in the Jonestown horror, the most tragic figure had to be the Georgetown optometrist in the bar at the Tower Hotel.

He had just been commissioned to make hundreds of pairs of glasses for the residents of Jonestown and had, in fact, delivered the spectacles to the campsite along with a bill for 14,000 Guyanese dollars, equivalent to about \$5,600.

The next thing he knew, everyone was dead. The glasses were gone and the bill was never paid.

It could put him out of business, the optometrist told reporters as he sipped another drink. "And they were going to make me the official Jonestown supplier, too."

The foreigners represented another extreme, sometimes no less distasteful. By the fifth or sixth day, many of the survivors had been bought, sold and traded among the more mercenary of the foreign journalists seeking their story.

This became apparent when reporters were trying to interview one of the Jonestown families that had survived. While one of the younger daughters

Imprint Remains

spoke freely to reporters, other members of the family could be heard caucusing in the background, discussing how to shut her up.

"Our agent is going to be furious," said one. "We weren't supposed to be talking to anyone until he gave the word."

In another corner of the same hotel, a representative of the National Enquirer sat guarding his purchase: one of the Jonestown survivors. When any other reporter would approach, the Enquirer representative would raise his hand to silence the survivor and remind him of the deal they had made.

Some publications, especially the German magazines, were paying large sums for exclusive rights to the survivors, reportedly as much as \$10,000.

Money often was paid on the spot. Payments were followed by a flow of prostitutes into the hotel late at night, apparently summoned by a few of the newly enriched survivors.

Some American reporters who arrived at Jonestown after most of the bodies had been cleared made much of the looting by Guyana residents that had apparently gone on at the campsite after the mass suicide.

When the reporters left, however, many had their pockets stuffed with letters and documents left among the debris by the hundreds of Jonestown victims.

Some of the American GIs removing bodies from the scene seized the same opportunity. They sold their documents to reporters eager for any scrap of information for their stories.

—Fred Barbash