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U.S. DISPUTES
HIJACK STORY

Canada Paper Claims
Cuba Sentencing Man

WASHINGTON (AP) — A report that airplane hijackers routinely receive stiff prison terms on their arrival in Cuba was disputed Tuesday by the State Department.

"This report comes as a shock to us," a State Department spokesman said of the story in the Montreal Star. The Canadian newspaper said more than half of the hijackers of American aircraft have been sentenced to the maximum penalty—five years at hard labor—for illegal entry into Cuba.

The newspaper said the penalty applies only to hijackers who are not political refugees. Quoting a source high in international aviation, the Star said hijackers seeking to avoid the draft have been toasted and honored in Havana.

"This just doesn't square with the facts," the spokesman said. "In fact, I can't think of any hijackers who fled to avoid the draft."

He said most do go to jail without trial but are confined only until the Cubans are convinced the hijackers are not CIA agents.

"There's no five-year term," the spokesman said. "I can tell you that two hijackers have already returned to this country." Both cases, the spokesman added, are pending in U.S. courts.

"What the Cubans do," he said, "is hold some hijackers in fairly close custody while others are held in loose custody. It all depends on how stable they are."

The Star said as a result of checks with the Swiss embassy in Havana, Cuban authorities found at least 18 persons with criminal backgrounds or domestic problems and these have been put to work at long hours in menial jobs or in the cane fields with political and criminal prisoners.

According to the Star Cuba had not made its policy public because it would like the world to think that all hijackers are fleeing the United States because they are dissatisfied with the system.