

Kennedy Hits U.S. Viet Stand

From News Dispatches

The State Department has assured Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) that there are no political prisoners in South Vietnam—at least by its definition.

Kennedy said the department has "once again . . . solved a problem by denying that it exists."

The department's views were contained in a reply to a March 25 letter from Kennedy listing 12 recommendations on Indochina policy developed by a study mission he sent to Southeast Asia last year.

The mission concluded that the Thieu government is still holding large numbers of non-Communist political prisoners—and getting support from U.S. funds to do so.

It urged the U.S. to phase out all such support and to make strong representations to the Saigon government to cease the practice and also to stop obstructing further repatriation of Communist prisoners.

Assistant Secretary of State Linwood Holton wrote Ken-

nedy that "the Department of State cannot agree with the study mission's assertion that the record is clear that political prisoners exist in South Vietnam.

One of the principal sources of confusion in this highly complex matter is the definition of the term 'political prisoner.' We interpret this term, as applied to South Vietnam, to refer to individuals of non-Communist, non-violent persuasion who are imprisoned only for expressing their criticism of the government.

"We note in this regard that the Government of Vietnam's stated policy does not permit the arrest of anyone for mere political dissent."

The State Department also denied "an obsession" with weapons deliveries in South Vietnam.

But, it said, North Vietnam remains an aggressor and South Vietnam needs the means to protect itself.

"We believe that denying such assistance would not contribute to peace but would inevitably lead to the greater use of force by North Vietnam," the department said.

"We would welcome," it added "policy shifts in Hanoi which would ease the tension and thus permit us to review policy in the light of a new situation."