

U.S. Knew of Thieu's Prison 'Tiger Cages'

Saigon

An American spokesman said last night that United States officials had been aware of "tiger cages" for political prisoners at the prison on Con Son Island, and had "discussed this with Vietnamese officials."

But the spokesman went to extraordinary lengths to di-

mission in Vietnam from the operation of the Vietnamese prison system.

In a press conference convened hastily at 11 p.m. Saigon time Roy W. Johnson of the embassy information staff read a statement which said: "The United States mission is aware of shortcomings in the corrections

program here in Vietnam. Our advisory effort and assistance are designed to help the Vietnamese government to the extent... we can to improve their system as rapidly and completely as possible..."

"Of course," the statement concluded, "the control of this (prison) system rests with the ministry of interior of the Vietnamese government. Specifically, there is no (American) public safety adviser stationed at Con Son."

RESPONSIBILITY

In response to a subsequent question, Johnson said that "I am denying (American) responsibility for tiger cages."

He added that Frank E. Walton, a former deputy police chief in Los Angeles who is the chief American public safety adviser here, and his staff have "urged strongly that a detailed investigation be made and any needed corrections be made" at Con Son. Johnson said this recommendation had been made before the current publicity about Con Son.

Reached by telephone, Walton said he had been instructed "to keep my lip zippered." He would make no other comment. He accompanied Representatives Augustus F. Hawkins (Dem-Calif.) and William R. Anderson (Dem-Tenn.) on their visit to Con Son last Thursday.

Johnson, the embassy spokesman, said that there already had been improvements made at Con Son, and possibly by Asian standards the prisons "aren't that bad" now. "I think the entire situation on the island has improved," he said, "(but) maybe not that particular area (the tiger cages)..."

AHEAD

"They tell me in many ways it is ahead of any advanced penal institutions," Johnson said of Con Son prison.

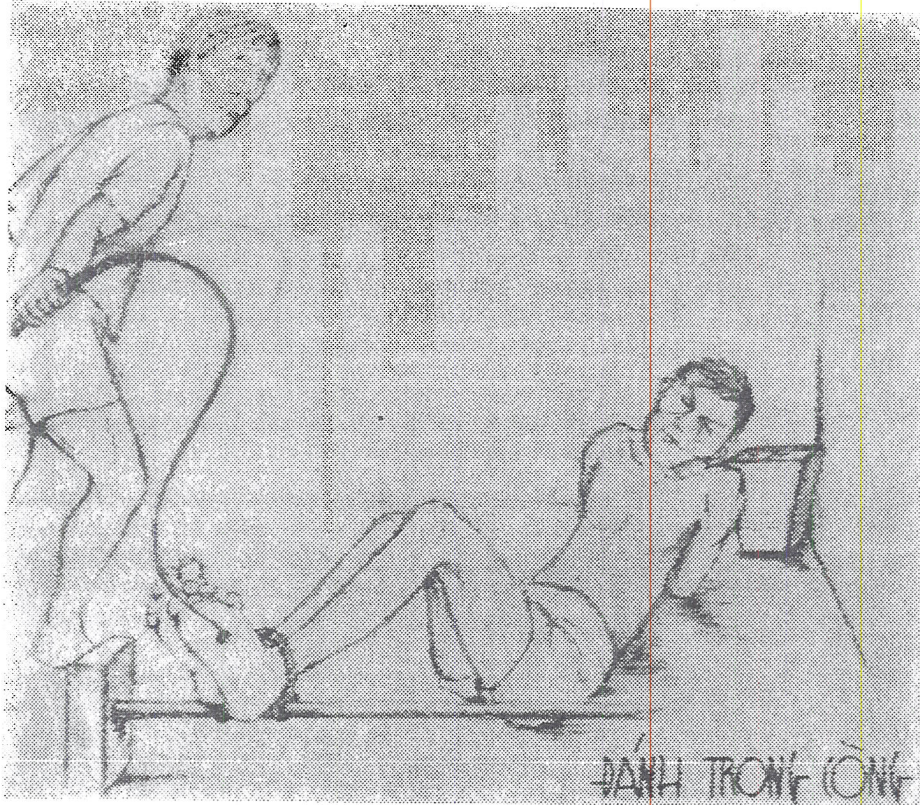
He said he thought "about 500 people" were imprisoned in the tiger cages.

The embassy's prepared statement said that during the last fiscal year the U.S. contributed \$442,000 to the Vietnamese penal system, primarily for construction of new facilities.

The U.S. public safety advisers are part of the pacification program, directed by Ambassador William Colby. Johnson was asked if Colby was concerned about the situation at Con Son. "He's been concerned about it for the last several hours," he replied with a smile.

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An Inmate's Memory



AP Wirephoto

A former inmate of Con Son Island prison sketched whipping of political prisoner tied to rack. Vietnamese printing: 'Beaten while in shackles'