

U.S. Air-Lift

Prisoners Flown From Con Son

Saigon

The South Vietnamese government, with assistance from the U.S. Air Force, is flying about 500 prisoners from the penal island of Con Son for release within the next few days, an Interior Ministry officer said yesterday.

South Vietnamese officials said that the releases had nothing to do with the controversy stirred last week when it was disclosed that the old French-built "tiger cages" on the island are still being used as maximum security cells.

The prisoners now being released are "low-level Communist criminals who have either completed their sentences or who are being granted time off for good behavior or for other reasons," an official said.

PROBE

The official said that the releases had been long planned and had no connection with an announced government investigation of the penal island.

He said the request of U.S. Air Force transport planes had been made July 5 and was routinely processed by the U.S. Air Force without further reference to the U.S. Embassy.

The first batch of 287 prisoners was flown from Con Son, some 60 miles off the coast, to Saigon on Sunday. More are expected daily as transport is available and the release will take place within a few days, the ministry official said.

EMBARRASSMENT

Although it was more or less a private South Vietnamese show, the U.S. mission was known to be somewhat embarrassed that Air Force

planes had been used without the approval of the American diplomatic authorities who nominally are in charge of all American activities in Vietnam.

In addition to the 500 men and women prisoners reportedly held in the maximum security cells of the "tiger cages," there are about 9500 prisoners on Con Son. Most of these were housed in more or less ordinary camps and army-type barracks buildings.

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