

500 FROM CON SON FLOWN TO SAIGON

Inmates of Island Prison
Will Be Freed—Link With
'Tiger Cage' Is Denied
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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, July 14—More than 500 prisoners have been flown on American military planes from the Con Son Prison to Saigon and are awaiting release, a South Vietnamese Government spokesman said here today.

Word spread among families of students and others who have been imprisoned at Con Son, an island 60 miles off the South Vietnamese Coast, that some of their loved ones had arrived in the capital. But pending a formal announcement, or more likely an inconspicuous release of the prisoners, there was no way the families could know who was on the list.

Government sources took the position that the return of the 500 prisoners was unrelated to the controversy stirred up over disclosures of the existence of "tiger cages" in the Con Son prison.

[In Geneva, reliable sources said that Red Cross inspectors had found in two visits to the Con Son Prison that conditions there were "not too bad" and that a vast majority of the 9,000 prisoners there were held as common criminals, with fewer than 50 classified as prisoners of war.]

Two members of a United States Congressional committee who visited the prison early this month said they had seen the "tiger cages" there, small

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stone compartments in which men and women prisoners were incarcerated under conditions of heat, filth and airlessness that the Americans called "shocking."

Students who have been released from Con Son have given graphic descriptions of the "tiger cages," including charges of having been shackled continuously in them. They have also charged that many prisoners were sent to Con Son, and to the tiger cages, without trial.

The Government, while admitting the existence of the tiger cages, says that they are "separate quarters" for temporary punishment of refractory prisoners, and that no one is sent to Con Son except after formal trial and sentencing.

U.S. Assistance Requested

The use of the "tiger cages" at Con Son was disclosed last week by August F. Hawkins, Democrat of California, and William R. Anderson, Democrat of Tennessee, members of a House of Representatives select committee on United States involvement in Southeast Asia, who visited the prison July 2.

United States officials here said that on July 7, the day that the first news reports of the Representatives' charges were published, the South Vietnamese Government requested the use of American C-130 transport aircraft to move 500 prisoners who had completed their terms from Con Son to Saigon.

The Government said that because South Vietnamese ships had been completely occupied with operations in Cambodia, a backlog of prisoners due to be released from Con Son had built up. Therefore it requested American assistance to move the prisoners by air, it said.

The American aircraft completed the operation in two days and the prisoners are being processed for release, a Government spokesman said.

The Government announced today that it had begun an investigation of conditions at Con Son. It said that if the findings supported the charges, the "tiger cages" would be abolished.

American sources said that the United States had not brought pressure on the South Vietnamese Government to free any prisoners, but had suggested that the Government investigate conditions in the Con Son Prison.

Red Cross Findings Cited

By THOMAS J. HAMILTON

Special to The New York Times

GENEVA, July 14 — Red Cross inspectors have found in two visits that conditions at the South Vietnamese prison at Con Son were "not too bad" and that a vast majority of the inmates were held as common criminals, reliable sources disclosed today.

These sources also revealed that fewer than 50 of the prison's 9,000 inmates were classified as prisoner of war. The 50 were assigned to the prison rather than to one of South Vietnam's six prisoner-of-war camps, because they were accused of crimes committed a civilians, either common crimes or acts of violence against the South Vietnamese Government, the Red Cross reports stated.

There was no indication whether any of these acts of violence could fall under the description of political crimes.

The latest Red Cross inspection took place last February, according to the sources.

The inspectors, who had been assigned by the all-Swiss International Committee of the Red Cross, reported that some prisoners were held in small, tightly packed cells, these sources said. The reports were not detailed enough, however, to show whether these were the "tiger cages" that have recently become the subject of controversy.

A spokesman for the International Committee reiterated today that, in accordance with the organization's standard practice, the reports on the Con Son Prison would not be made public. He limited himself to the statement that the reports showed that the majority of the prisoners there were not prisoners of war.

Responsibility Is Limited

The International Committee's responsibilities under the Geneva Convention of 1949 are confined to prisoners of war.

A copy of the reports made after each of the two inspections was given to Le Van Voi, South Vietnam's representative to the international organizations situated in Geneva, who forwarded them by diplomatic pouch to his Government.

A spokesman for the United States mission to the United Nations' Geneva office said today that Mr. Loi, in accord with his standard practice regarding Red Cross reports on prisoner-of-war camps, had submitted a copy to the mission, which sent it to the State Department.

The United States operates no prisoner-of-war camps in South Vietnam. Hence the only reports submitted directly to the American mission are those of Red Cross visits to United States-operated prisoner collection centers, where prisoners are classified as prisoners of war, "civil defendants" or innocent bystanders.