

# Saigon Says No Political Captives Held

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SAIGON, July 2.—Stung by international criticism and journalistic commentary, South Vietnam today denied

in a long formal statement that it holds any political prisoners, and defended conditions in its prisons as humane and fair.

An official communique from the Foreign Ministry said charges that the government holds thousands of political prisoners and tortures its inmates result from a "campaign of intoxication orchestrated by international communism."

The statement followed the release Sunday of a report by the London-based organization, Amnesty International, calling for concerted world pressure for the release of some 100,000 civilians it said were held by South Vietnam.

### Correspondent Expelled

The government is probably more sensitive to criticism about political prisoners than any other matter. Foreign journalists, politicians, and religious figures have found that they could criticize the government about almost anything else without reprisal, but statements about political prisoners bring prompt response. Even a bishop of the Catholic Church was officially denounced as "a liar" not long ago for joining the critical chorus.

Today's communique was ac-

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panied by the announcement that the Saigon correspondent of the huge Japanese daily Asahi Shimbun was to be expelled because the paper recently said in an editorial that Saigon holds 300,000 political prisoners—the highest estimate yet published.

A spokesman for the newspaper said the figure was a mistake in translation and that it had actually estimated that 100,000 to 200,000 prisoners were being held.

It is true that the most virulent criticism of Saigon on this issue comes from North Vietnam and the Vietcong, who fill their radio broadcasts with lurid tales of beaten, maimed victims. But most foreigners who have been here any length of time can attest that the government's hands are not entirely clean, by U.S. standards.

### Saigon's Rationale

Everyone who has inquired knows of some Vietnamese who have simply disappeared after midnight arrests, or been killed or imprisoned for years without benefit of indictment or trial. The most trivial offense, such as possession of the sheet music of antiwar

songs, can result in prolonged incarceration.

The government, however, denies that persons arrested in such cases are "political prisoners."

"Even within a democracy in time of peace," today's statement said, "attempts against internal and external security of the state, such as

vandalism, robbery, rebellion, spying, cooperation with the enemy, and high treason should be punished with extreme vigor, regardless of being labelled by the Communists as political offenses."

To the government's critics, the problem is that such offenses as "high treason" and "rebellion" are used to cover a wide range of alleged offenses—and some suspects are never formally accused at all.

"If by political prisoners one means people detained only because of their opposition to the policies of the government," the statement issued to the press today said, "then there are no political prisoners in South Vietnam. Nobody has been arrested merely for having expressed his views against the government."

But "if one means those people who belong to organiza-

tions whose main aim is to overthrow the elected government of South Vietnam, such as the National Liberation Front, and who performed subversive activities on behalf of these organizations," their fate is to be determined according to the Paris place agreement.

### Two Classifications

That is another way of saying that the government holds only two kinds of civilian prisoners—communists and common criminals. The former, whose number is given by the government as 5,081, are to be turned over to North Vietnam. The latter, about whom the Paris agreement says nothing, are to be kept in prison according to the country's laws.

The effect of this argument is to remove the possibility that vocal, confirmed, pacifist opponents of the government, even if they are not communists, will be turned loose in the streets and rice fields of South Vietnam. By classifying them as common criminals, the government can keep them out of the purview of the Paris agreement.

According to several informed sources, this is one of

the principal disputes delaying an agreement between Saigon and the Vietcong on a prisoner exchange. The Communists are said to be most anxious that prisoners who oppose the Thieu government, but do not want to go to North Vietnam, be granted liberty within the south.

### Rejects Claim

Today's communique contained nothing new in the way of statistics. It rejected the Communists' claim of 200,000 political prisoners as "a product of their imagination," and reiterated the claim that the Vietcong and North Vietnam hold some 68,000 South Vietnamese civilians.

"Whereas the Communist side is unable to substantiate the existence of the two hundred thousand so-called political prisoners with facts, the government of the Republic of Vietnam is ready at any time to expose to anyone the list of 16,798 government civilian personnel and 51,823 South Vietnamese civilians captured and detained by the Communists since 1954, with their names, addresses, professions, date, and place of abduction, etc.," the communique said.