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Senator returns to South Vietnam's "tiger cages"

PRIORITY: urgent

North American News Report DATE: July 5, 1995 10:27 F.T.

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CON SON ISLAND, Vietnam (Reuter) - U.S. Senator Tom Harkin paid an emotional return visit Wednesday to the former South Vietnamese "tiger cage" prison cells whose existence he disclosed to a shocked world 25 years ago.

Harkin went round the Trai Phu Tuong prison where about 500 communists or dissidents were held in appalling conditions by the U.S.-backed former Saigon regime, which lost the war in 1975.

He broke the news of the cells' existence in 1970, when he visited Con Son Island as a congressional staff aide after being tipped off by a former inmate, Cao Nguyen Loi.

"It was a stroke of luck that we found the prison," he recalled. "It was as quiet as a tomb when we came in as people thought if they spoke they would be beaten. Gradually people started talking and it became a cacophony of sounds and voices, asking us to tell their story and get them out of there."

Loi, then a student, now a businessman, went round the cells Wednesday with Harkin, who had an emotional reunion with former prisoners in Ho Chi Minh City Tuesday night.

The "tiger cages" -- cells five ft. by nine ft. -- each contained up to six prisoners. They have horizontal bars at first-floor level, through which guards used to throw water or, as a punishment, lime.

The cages are now a museum and some contain models of shackled prisoners carved from wood.

They were originally built by the former French colonial regime, which used Con Son Island as a penal colony.

A South Korean company is planning to build a \$290 million tourist resort on the island, part of the Con Dao group, about 125 miles south of Ho Chi Minh City.

Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, held talks earlier this week with Vietnamese government ministers in Hanoi and said he expected President Clinton to make a decision soon on establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

In an interview on the plane returning from the island, he said he was concerned that Vietnam's present government was "not allowing freedoms and liberties that it should."

But it was better than the ousted South Vietnamese regime, "and I found there is  
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 KNIGHT-RIDDER  
INFORMATION

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*DIALOG Alert PRINTS for UD=9507W1*

a willingness to discuss and develop concepts of human rights," Harkin said. The human rights situation in China was worse, he added.

"How can we recognize China, and even extend to it MFN (Most Favored Nation trading status) and not recognize Vietnam when the situation in China is so much worse?" he asked.

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*Senator returns to South Vietnam's "tiger cages"*

PRIORITY: rush

Reuter World Service DATE: July 5, 1995 08:32 E.T.

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Loi, then a student, now a businessman, went round the cells on Wednesday with Harkin, who had an emotional reunion with former prisoners in Ho Chi Minh City on Tuesday night.

The "tiger cages" -- cells five feet by nine feet (1.5 metres by 2.7 metres) -- each contained up to six prisoners. They have horizontal bars at first-floor level, through which guards used to throw water or, as a punishment, lime.

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