

South Vietnam Lets Reporters Visit P.O.W. Camp

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

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CANTHO, South Vietnam, Oct. 28 — As part of its stepped-up efforts to demonstrate what it terms a "humanitarian" policy on the prisoner-of-war issue, the South Vietnamese Government allowed a group of newsmen today to tour its prisoner-of-war camp here at Cantho in the Mekong Delta.

The visit, the first that the South Vietnamese have permitted to a prisoner camp in over a year, was timed to coincide with the Government announcement that 2,938 Vietcong prisoners of war would be released on Sunday in honor of President Nguyen Van Thieu's inauguration.

American officials in Saigon said today they welcomed the South Vietnamese announce-

ment, describing it as "a major humanitarian gesture."

The American officials pointed out that Saigon's action was the largest such release of the war and that it involved almost 10 per cent of the 37,000 prisoners of war in South Vietnam.

Hanoi's Reaction Awaited

The officials added that they certainly do not expect any immediate reciprocal action on the part of North Vietnam, though they are "hopeful" that this gesture may encourage some flexibility in Hanoi on the prisoner issue.

The camp here at Cantho, 90 miles southeast of Saigon, is one of six run by the South Vietnamese. It holds 3,007 prisoners, including 66 North Vietnamese, in a complex of low, corrugated iron barracks on the flat and muddy delta plain.

Although there have been rumors in Saigon of killings and revolts inside the prison

camp, the Cantho commandant, Maj. Hoang Dinh Hoat, said there had been no major disturbances and no escapes at the camp since he took it over in 1969.

Major Hoat, a slender man with a narrow face and large, sad-looking eyes, said: "The prisoners sometimes complain about having to work too long outside the camp, but we have set up channels for them to express their grievances and there has been no trouble."

The 30 newsmen who toured the camp were not allowed to talk to the prisoners, but were permitted to walk freely among them and photograph them. At one point some of the visitors, unaccompanied by guards, entered the barracks occupied by North Vietnamese officers.

The prisoners, dressed in maroon pajamas, stared at the newsmen, but they neither spoke nor made any gestures. Their simple belongings, issued by the South Vietnamese Gov-

ernment, lay piled neatly on their wooden sleeping racks.

They included a mosquito net, a blanket, a sleeping mat, a canteen, spoon, toothpaste and a brush, a towel and soap.

According to Major Hoat, who was trained as a military policeman in the United States, the prisoners are allowed weekly visits by their families and are permitted to send and receive mail. The camp's statistics showed that 1,250 men had visitors last month.

62 Died in 4 Years

A small, whitewashed building, one of the camp's few buildings afforded the luxury of tree shade against the blistering delta sun, serves as a dispensary. A group of 20 prisoners squatted on their heels, waiting to see the doctor.

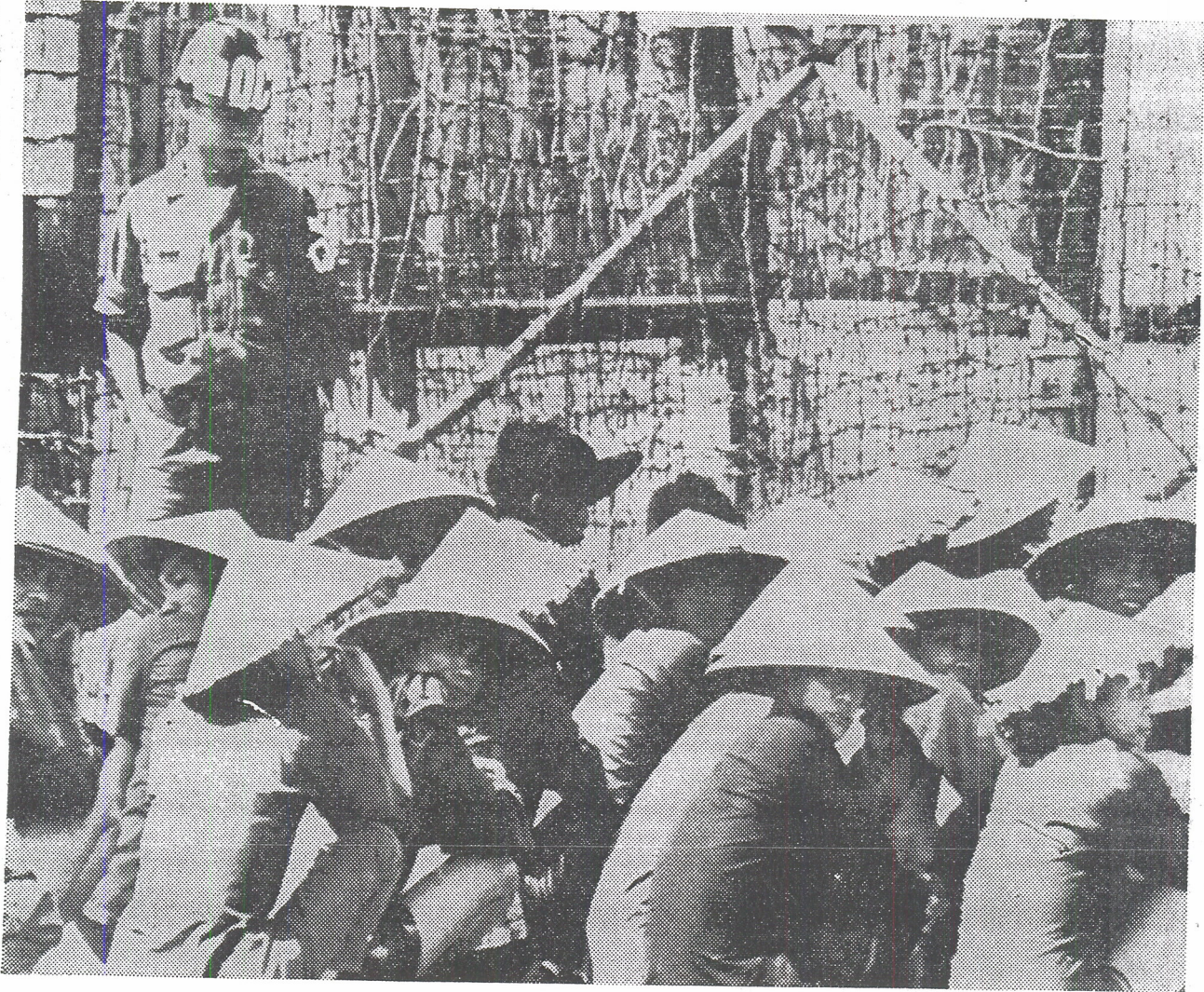
Major Hoat said that 62 prisoners had died in the camp since it was built in 1967, most of them from wounds they had suffered before they came to Cantho. He denied that his guards used any form of violence to discipline the prisoners.

Three hundred and ten of the prisoners have decided to become hoi chanh, or "returnees" to the Government. They wear black pajamas and have certain privileges and duties like those of trustees in American prisons.

If, after a screening process, the returnees are accepted by the Government, they will be sent to a chieu hoi or "open arms" center for six to eight weeks' indoctrination and will be freed.

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VIETCONG PRISONERS IN SOUTH VIETNAM: P.O.W.'s being guarded by a South Vietnamese soldier at a detention center at Cantho. South Vietnam plans to free 3,000 Vietcong "who have proved to be sincerely repentant."