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Justice in Saigon

**Instant Courts, Harsh Penalties
Are Answer to Wave of Crime**

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SAIGON—The military authorities are meting out an instant and sometimes harsh justice to thieves and other wrongdoers here and in the rest of South Vietnam.

Every day brings fresh tales of troops on police duty firing on fleeing street thieves or convoking "people's courts." There are also several reports of actual street executions.

The stories are difficult to check. Military authorities have no information system of any kind, and the actual incidents are swiftly magnified by rumor. But some are clearly true.

One report from the countryside said that troops caught a thief trying to steal a scooter bus that had been left by the roadside while its owner went for gasoline. When the thief confessed, they cut off his left hand.

Another from Cholon, Saigon's Chinese district, said a police patrol had executed an opium peddler after convening a people's court. Other reports speak of less harsh penalties—witnesses describe thieves forced to walk up and down wearing placards saying what they had done.

Restoration of order, if not yet of law, was one of the military authorities' first aims. The disappearance of police from the streets led to a minor crime wave as soon as criminals realized that the liberation troops, unfamiliar with the city and at that stage without orders, presented no threat.

The new authorities compounded the problem by opening the jails, releasing many criminals along with the political detainees. One political prisoner, an Indian, estimated that 70 per cent of the population of the main Saigon prison were ordinary criminals.

In the center of the city, the most common crime was the old favorite of the Saigon motorcycle "cowboys"—snatching bags from pedestrians. Elsewhere there was a swift rise in burglaries.

The Military Management Committee issued edicts, but these seemed to make no difference. Then, as organization improved, the committee created a Liberation Military Police. It is now patrolling the city in squads of six or eight men, armed with sub-machine guns. The squad leader usually carries a walkie-talkie.

A swift and sometimes harsh military justice probably was the only way to bring the crime wave to an end, since the aggressiveness of Saigon's criminals, prostitutes and drug pushers had to be seen to be believed.

Within 24 hours of the fall of Saigon, they had resumed their activities—apparently under the blithe assumption that they could operate unscathed indefinitely.

Many Westerners lost money and valuables from their hotel rooms at that time. The Military Management Committee was probably especially concerned, since numerous Communist diplomats in from Hanoi for the victory celebrations were staying at the same hotels.

In the working-class districts, the situation is the opposite of that in center and the middle-class neighborhoods. An English religious worker who lives in such a district says that the fall-off of crime is a subject of amazed discussion among ordinary people.

Saigon used to have 20,000 policemen, even if they were often inefficient and corrupt. A socialist city—which Saigon certainly has not yet become—needs policemen too. In addition,