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**Viet Prison**  
**Brutality**  
**Documented**

First of two articles

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The U.S. government knew of beatings and large-scale brutality at some of South Vietnam's largest prisons and prisoner-of-war camps where "tiger cages" were found as early as 1969.

A three-foot high stack of International Red Cross reports, recently declassified, and interviews with Red Cross and American officials have provided for the first time a picture from a neutral viewpoint of South Vietnam's prisons, where between 65,000 and 70,000 people were confined at the height of the war.

Written in the cool, dry French of the Swiss doctors, lawyers and other professionals who served on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) mission to Vietnam, the reports generally gave satisfactory to good grades to almost all facilities inspected.

But there were several significant exceptions.

After each inspection by trained Red Cross delegates, Washington was given a copy of their report.

The reports also document the standard American practice of taking civilian prisoners during military operations, classifying them

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as offenders and turning them over to South Vietnamese police, who often treated them as political prisoners.

The delegates found and examined North Vietnamese and Vietcong prisoners of war who had been beaten, sometimes fatally, by South Vietnamese guards. Red Cross doctors described women prisoners tortured to the point of recurrent **hypertension**.

The International Red

Cross, which now has 150 delegates on missions around the world, does not publish its reports.

The reports were released here at the end of a 2½-year suit under the Freedom of Information Act against the State Department, which received, classified and held the documents until after the war ended.

Some reports came to the United States through the South Vietnamese government, but, beginning in 1970, most came from Geneva headquarters of the ICRC through the U.S. Mission there.

"The situation (here) may be qualified as catastrophic," a Red Cross delegation concluded in its October, 1970, report on the POW camp, on Phuquoc Island, where 25,900 prisoners, or almost one-third of all those held in the country, were then lodged.

Three POWs who had complained to the delegates were severely beaten by camp guards after speaking out and had to be flown out on an American airplane for treatment.

No entirely American-run facility was ever given a wholly unfavorable report, although scattered allegations of torture by beating or electric shock were made by prisoners at the prisoner "collecting points" attached to American units in the field.

These "collecting points," where prisoners stayed a few days at most, were the only kinds of camps run by Americans after 1968, and the American lieutenants and captains in command were often commended in writing by the ICRC. Red Cross doctors wrote enthusiastically of the advanced medical techniques being used in the treatment of prisoners at American field hospitals.

However, the delegates found continuing, systematic brutality at the two principal Vietnamese POW camps

—at Phuquoc and Quinhon. American advisers were stationed in these camps beginning in 1967.

The ICRC gradually gave visits to the large civilian prisons, where almost all political prisoners were held, because South Vietnamese authorities would not let them talk to prisoners alone.

For this reason, no ICRC report was made on the disciplinary cells at South Vietnam's biggest civilian prison on Conson Island, where between 9,000 and 10,000 were held. Conson's French-built tiny cells, called "tiger cages," made Vietnamese prison conditions an American issue after two visiting congressmen saw them in July, 1970.

The ICRC, a permanent, Swiss-staffed body that watches over worldwide compliance with the 1949 Geneva conventions on war and on the treatment of prisoners, has had a mission in South Vietnam since 1965, a spokesman said.

But ICRC inspectors, in spite of numerous efforts, were never authorized by North Vietnamese authorities to visit American POWs held in the north.

Although the prisons in the South were run by Vietnamese and the camps were commanded by Vietnamese officers with U.S. advisers, the Red Cross considered the United States responsible for prisoners taken by American forces.

In the largest POW camp, according to the data recorded by the ICRC, that normally meant just under half the prisoners.

The United States specifically recognized its responsibility for POWs and civilian prisoners, in a letter to the Geneva headquarters of the Red Cross in December, 1970, six months after the Conson "tiger cages" scandal.

From 1967 to 1971 U.S. civilian and military missions spent \$122 million on police and prison aid and stationed hundreds of advisers around the country with orders to bring the Vietnamese into line with the Geneva conventions.

Those conventions, ratified by 138 countries, including the United States and South Vietnam, set out specific rules for the treatment of prisoners of war and forbid physical mistreatment, torture, deprivation of food or medicine or any disciplinary treatment lasting more than 48 hours.

The Red Cross delegates, escorted throughout the



country by American staff officers in U.S. aircraft, found violations of all these prohibitions.

Some charges of prisoner mistreatment from opponents of the war and challengers of President Nguyen Van Thieu's government are substantiated in the dispassionate language of the ICRC reports. Others are not born out.

The claim made by some American antiwar groups that the South Vietnamese government kept 200,000 prisoners is not supported by the data collected by the ICRC.

Calculating from the detailed prison population reports given to the ICRC in mid-1970, it appears that the system of four national civilian prisons, including Conson, six major and 44 minor POW camps, and scores of screening and interrogation centers could have held a maximum of about 70,000 prisoners.

About one third of those held at any given time — men, women and children — were prisoners of war captured with weapons in hand or wearing insignia.

The contention made by U.S. government officials until late in the war that political prisoners were a strictly Vietnamese affair is not borne out by the Red Cross reports.

In June and July, 1970, ICRC delegates visited 19 of the more than 20 prisoner screening and classification camps maintained by U.S. combat divisions and brigades in the field.

They were given population reports covering the preceding six months, which showed that the largest single group of prisoners held after screening by mixed Vi-

etnamese-U.S. interrogation teams were civilians turned over to the Vietnamese police.

The group was made up, according to the U.S. regulation governing the screening process, of people subject to trial by the Vietnamese government for offenses that included political crimes and those suspected of spying or terrorist activities.

The Red Cross found men who had worked for or contributed to the Vietcong against their will in this group of American-captured and classified prisoners.

More than half of the Vietnamese captured by American units in the first half of 1970 were classified as "innocent civilians" and returned to their villages,

sometimes by truck or helicopter. Of those who remained, according to the CRC data, 870 were POWs and 2,489 were sent to the Vietnamese as "civilian dependants."

Finally, the reports of "tiger cage" disciplinary cells, dismissed by some U.S. officials as propaganda, are confirmed.

Although they never saw the rock-walled tiger cages with iron grate ceilings at Conson, the ICRC delegates found another kind in POW camps at Pleiku, Quinhon and in each unit of the sprawling barracks at Phuquoc.

Those they found were barbed wire cages about the size of an office desk, built in the open air. Prisoners were forced to crawl into them and remain squatting in the tropical sun.

"The big thing was the sun in that punishment," recalled an American lieutenant colonel who visited many POW camps with the ICRC.

He asserted, and other officers and former Red Cross delegates agreed, that the same punishment was used on soldiers in South Vietnam's army.

The Red Cross reports show changing attitudes towards the cages.

Delegates twice demanded that they be removed from the 2,000-man POW camp at Pleiku, and reported their removal with satisfaction in late 1970.

But at Phuquoc, the largest camp, they reported the cages for three years before pressing successfully for their removal in 1971.

*NEXT: An attempt to separate friend from foe.*