

Americans Find Brutality In South Vietnamese Jail

By GLORIA EMERSON JUL 7 1970
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, July 6 — An American who visited South Vietnam's largest civilian prison last Thursday reported here today on what he described as the inhuman conditions and intimidation existing there. 2 JULY

Don Luce, who is gathering information in Vietnam for the Division of InterChurch Aid of the World Council of Churches, said that 500 of the 9,900 prisoners believed to be on the island known as Con Son were confined in small stone compartments, and that many of the prisoners were unable to stand. The prisoners, he said, suffer from malnutrition, physical abuse and filthy conditions.

Mr. Luce was able to visit the island, which is 140 miles southeast of Saigon, because of Augustus F. Hawkins, a Democrat from the Watts area in Los Angeles, and Representative William R. Anderson, Democrat of Tennessee. The group was accompanied by a Congressional aide, Thomas Harkin, who photographed the worst of the prisons.

The legislators were in South Vietnam as part of a 12-man House committee that made on a fact-finding tour on the United States' involvement in Asia.

Newsman Are Barred

Access to the prison is denied to newsmen. South Vietnamese officials generally deny that conditions are extremely harsh on the island, which is often referred to by its French name, *Polo Condor*.

The small stone compartments, known to the Vietnamese as tiger cages, were not voluntarily shown to the American visitors. The purpose of the trip had been to see if they existed.

Attempts to prevent the inspection were made by the warden, Col. Nguyen Van Ve. Mr. Luce also asserts that when the legislators asked to see six specific prisoners—four students, the editor of a French-language daily newspaper closed by the Government and another man—the colonel became angry. Mr. Luce had supplied the prisoners' names to the legislators.

After insisting that a telegram be sent to the Ministry of the Interior in Saigon asking permission for the group to see the six prisoners, Colonel Ve, according to Mr. Luce, said in Vietnamese to his own aide: "Do not worry about getting an answer—the important thing is to send it."

The warden did not know that Mr. Luce, who has been in South Vietnam for more than 11 years, speaks Vietnamese fluently.

According to Mr. Luce, Frank E. Walton, the American who heads the Public Safety Directorate — an advisory program in South Vietnam under the wing of Civil Operations-Revolutionary Development Support known as CORDS — backed the warden in his attempts to block the visitors.

"Walton suggested we visit the curio shop," Mr. Luce continued. "He was angry to see me with the Congressmen and said, 'I thought this trip was above board — Luce has misrepresented everything in Vietnam.'"

Mr. Luce, who is 35 years old and came here in 1958 as a volunteer social-service worker, has been an outspoken critic of United States involvement in Vietnam and of the Saigon Government.

Mr. Luce, who had been told of a hidden entry to the tiger cages, saw a tiny gate. Representative Hawkins asked Colonel Ve to have the door opened after the warden had said it was not possible. A

guard, hearing the warden's voice, opened the door and the Americans went inside with the warden at their heels.

"We looked down from a catwalk through large openings—one for each cell," Mr. Luce related. "These were the tiger cages which are not supposed to exist anymore."

He said that in the presence of Colonel Ve the Americans visited two buildings composed of what he described as airless, hot, filthy stone compartments. In the building for men, according to Mr. Luce, three or four prisoners are in each compartment, which seemed not quite 5 feet across and 9 feet long.

"It was high enough for the prisoners to stand up but none of the men did," he related. "They dragged themselves to the spot where they could look up and speak to us. The men claimed they were beaten, that they were very hungry because they were only given rice that had sand and pebbles in it."

The prisoners also pleaded for water, Mr. Luce said, and cried out that they were sick and had no medicine.

Above each compartment, Mr. Luce related, was a bucket of powdery white lime that Colonel Ve said was used for whitewashing the walls but that the prisoners said was thrown down on them when they asked for food.

The women prisoners, who numbered about 250, told Mr. Luce, he said, that they were moved from mainland prisons seven months ago. They had the same complaints, he added, and also said there was no water for washing.

He said there appeared to be 60 or 70 compartments in each of the two buildings, with five women in a compartment.

When the group came out of the tiger camps after an hour and 15 minutes, Mr. Luce said, they met Mr. Walton, who rebuked them for "intruding" into a Vietnamese prison.

Mr. Luce related that Mr. Hawkins said that he hoped Americans in North Vietnam were not being treated as were the prisoners he had seen.

A fact sheet distributed in Saigon by Mr. Walton's agency over his signature quotes him as describing the "Con Son National Correction Center" as follows:

"In the opinion of correction advisors with lengthy U.S. penology experience, Con Son is not a 'Devil's Island,' but on the contrary is a correctional institution worthy of higher ratings than some prisons in the United States."

Other Facilities Visited

The center was established by the French in 1862 and its name stands for a fearful ordeal. The French, it is said, built the tiger cages.

The legislators and their aide, with Mr. Luce, toured three somewhat more orthodox facilities where groups of prisoners are confined in a large room.

Mr. Luce, who was busy talking with the prisoners, said today that he could not observe whether the conditions were adequate.

"They were terribly scared, very frightened people," Mr. Luce said. "When the guard was not standing near us, the prisoners would tell me that they had never stood trial or been sentenced for any crime and that there was not enough food, water or medical treatment."

"When the prison guards came up," Mr. Luce added, "the prisoner would say to me, 'I am a political prisoner,' and in one instance the guard replied for the man, 'You were arrested because you were a traitor.'"