

The Other Prisoners

By GEORGE WALD

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—A few months ago I was in Saigon with an American student delegation. My most moving experience there was meeting 21 prisoners at a reception center in a Buddhist pagoda, all of whom had been released within the preceding two to three weeks. They had been in prison from three to fifteen years. About half of them were out of the tiger cages on Con Son Island. The marks of suffering were visible upon them. One had been totally blinded by what we were told is a disciplinary device at Con Son: throwing lime down on the prisoners. One had lost a leg. Several had difficulty walking.

Each of them told his story, an interpreter translating line for line. What impressed me most was their anger; they were bitterly angry, and that anger was directed mainly, not at their Government, but at ours.

Why? For one thing, every prison, every interrogation center in South Vietnam, has an American adviser. When Congressman William Anderson, guided by a crude map that an American newsman, Don Luce, had drawn for him, discovered the Tiger Cages on Con Son, the American adviser, an Army officer, upbraided him for inter-

fering in what was not his business.

Second, the South Vietnamese police are trained and equipped by Americans. That operation is now costing us \$30 million a year. It is part of our Agency for International Development program.

Third, last January the U.S. Navy Contracts Office in Saigon issued a \$400,000 contract to the American construction combine, Raymond, Morrison, Knudsen-Brown, Root and Jones, to build three new tiers of tiger cages on Con Son Island. The job was to be done with prison labor, at pay scales of 55 to 72 cents per week. The former tiger cages were built by the French colonial regime. We are building the new ones.

These things are well known to the Vietnamese, in general if not in detail. Those prisoners had some reason for their accusations. But then the conversation took a strange turn. Would we tell President Nixon? Surely if he knew what was going on he would stop it.

How many prisoners are in South Vietnamese jails? No one knows. All requests for lists by the South Vietnamese Committee on Prison Reform have been refused. That committee estimates the total at over 100,000. Representative Anderson in The Congressional Record for June 17 says

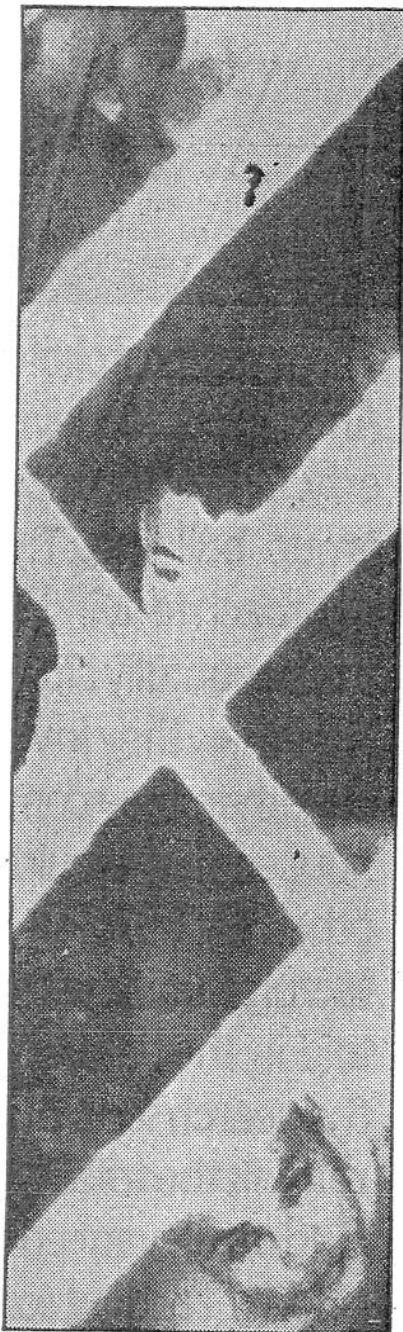


at least 120,000—most of whom have never stood trial. We were told that there are at least as many prisons in South Vietnam as schools, and more prisoners than students.

And the American role? As our aid allocation for police rose from \$20.9 million in 1970 to \$30 million in 1971, our contribution for education fell from \$6.1 million in 1970 to \$4.5 million in 1971. That is symptomatic of our present aid program in South Vietnam.

"Who is jailed in South Vietnam? A merry looking woman, Nguyen Thi Binh, told us with surprising calm of her two daughters, high school students, arrested at the ages of 17 and 19 and never tried, who have spent the last three years in prison. A lawyer spoke to me with deep concern about a teacher, Tran Huu Khue, in prison since 1965 and then neither seen nor heard from for two months, with word only that a secret police search of his home had revealed alleged connections with the Vietcong. A shy young student, Vu Thi Dung, Foreign Relations Officer of the Saigon Student Association, acts as go-between and interpreter for English-speaking students and other visitors, as she did for us. She learned her English attending high school for a year as an exchange student in East Lansing, Mich. On Oct. 9 she was picked up by the secret police and held incommunicado, ostensibly for taking part in a protest against the one-man election. Her brother writes me, "Why does the American President protect a cruel despot in my country, while the American people are enjoying freedom and democracy? Why?" What am I to say? That our democracy is not for export?

One of our hosts in Saigon, Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh, master in comparative law from Columbia University, chairman of the Women's Association for the Right to Live, co-chairman of the People's Front for the Defense of Peace, and an international member of the Women's International League for



Peace and Freedom, was arrested on a Saigon street by the secret police, a few hours after talking with Senator Adlai Stevenson III, and held incommunicado. Later she was released, then arrested again on Sept. 18 during a demonstration against the one-man election, this time suffering acutely from what seems to have been exposure to the lung gas, CS.

We have a letter from our State Department commenting on both incidents. It explains that the first arrest involved what appeared to be "the Vietnamese equivalent of contempt of court," whereas the second arrest was for "participating in a demonstration . . . pending disposition of this latest case, she remains under detention."

All perfectly legal, even familiar, here as there. Nothing to get excited about. As Ambassador Bunker said to us in Saigon about the coming rigged and unopposed election, "Well, even after two hundred years we still have gross irregularities in our own elections."

Who are we to call the kettle black?

This is the first of two articles by George Wald, Nobel Prize winner in 1967 and Higgins professor of biology at Harvard.