

New Stories of Torture By the Saigon Regime

By Sydney H. Schanberg

Saigon

Documents smuggled out of South Vietnamese prisons and extensive interviews with former prisoners paint a picture of widespread torture of people jailed by the Saigon government since the North Vietnamese offensive started four and a half months ago.

The accounts in these documents and many obtained by this correspondent were purportedly written by prisoners — and in some cases by sympathetic guards — and then smuggled out.

The accounts are typical of the stories told in the other documents and in the interviews about the treatment of the thousands of students, workers, peasants, women and children arrested by the national police and the military authorities in the "pre-emptive sweeps" made in the search for Communist sympathizers and agents.

DOCUMENTS

Some of the documents reached this correspondent through friends of prisoners or critics of the government to whom the papers had been passed. Some of the interviews were also arranged this way. Additional information was gathered on the basis of other leads.

There is no way to verify the accounts of torture first hand, for the Saigon government refuses to allow journalists to visit its prisons, which it calls "re-education centers." A formal written request was denied.

China Says U.S. Is Bombing Dikes

Tokyo

China said yesterday that the United States is bombing North Vietnamese dikes and unless it stops "will surely receive severe punishment by the Vietnamese people."

An editorial in the official party organ, People's Daily, rejected U.S. explanations that the dikes were not being bombed intentionally but may have been hit accidentally.

Associated Press

All of those interviewed said their names could not be used because they feared police reprisals.

As with the smuggled documents, it is impossible to corroborate the accounts given by former prisoners as interviews. But widespread reports bear out the prisoners' version.

DEFENSE

Government officials and pro-government legislators defend the recent repressive measures by arguing that the survival of South Viet-

and gave her unbearable headaches.

"One girl was so badly tortured that the police left her in a corridor outside the interrogation room for a day — so that other prisoners would not see her condition."

TYPICAL

This was a typical story of those interviewed. Some said that water had been forced down their mouths until they nearly drowned. Others told of electric prods used on sensitive parts of the body, of fingernails pulled out and fingers mashed.

Several of the informants said they had discovered while in prison, a sardonic saying favored by the police — "Khong, danh cho co." — "If they are innocent, beat them until they become guilty."

It is impossible to tell how many of those arrested really have Communist connections and how many are simply opposed to the government of Thieu — because the police seem to make little distinction.

RANDOM

There is a third category of prisoners as well — people who were apparently seized at random and who committed no crime. They just happened to have been in the wrong place.

Critics of the government say that each district administration has been given a quota of arrests and that local officials have been trying to meet the quotas quickly with little regard for legal niceties.

Legal form, rarely observed with fidelity at any time in South Vietnam's recent story, has clearly been abandoned since the enemy offensive began. On the one hand, Thieu continues to declare that the back of the North Vietnamese drive has been broken, yet on the other he has been using his recently granted special powers to narrow civil liberties further.

nam is at stake. Critics reply that only the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, not South Vietnam, is at stake.

"Necessity requires us to accept a flexible view of the law," one official said. "You wouldn't wait until the Viet Cong agent pointed his gun at your back before you handcuffed him, would you? Legal aspects do not count when there is a question of survival involved."

The victims, obviously, feel differently. Here, for example, is part of an account given by a woman who was interrogated intensively but not beaten, in a police detention center in Saigon and then released.

"When you were not being interrogated, you could hear the screams of people being tortured. Sometimes they showed you the torture going on, to try to frighten you into saying what they wanted you to say.

"Two women in my cell were pregnant. One was beaten badly. Another woman was beaten mostly on the knees, which became infected.

"One high school student tried to kill herself by cutting both wrists on the metal water taps in the washroom, but she failed. They had tortured her by putting some kind of thick rubber band around her head to squeeze it. It made her eyes swell out

SUSPENDED

Although no government edict has been issued, the normal laws governing the right of the accused appear to have been virtually suspended. Often those arrested are reportedly not told the charge against them nor allowed to consult a lawyer.

Prisoners are sometimes kept for months and years without a hearing or trial. Often the police will not acknowledge that they are holding a particular person so his family is unable to locate him.

In a sense, many of these people and their cases simply disappear — except for reports that leak out clandestinely.

It is impossible to tell, without government cooperation, how many thousands have been arrested since the North Vietnamese offensive began. Most foreign diplomats think the figure is more than 10,000. One American source said slightly more than 15,000 people had been jailed and about 5000 released later. But whatever the exact figures, it is clear that thousands remain in prison and that arrests continue.

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