

# Caged by Saigon

By Fred Branfman

WASHINGTON—There are more political prisoners in South Vietnam today than in any nation in the world. Amnesty International estimates that there are 100,000. This is three times its 31,000 estimate for the Soviet Union, Brazil, Turkey, Spain, Ceylon, Portugal, Angola, Mozambique, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and South Africa combined.

The Thieu Government has announced that it will release only 3,500 of those now in prison to the other side, holding tens of thousands of political prisoners for the indefinite future.

There are many reasons why Congress should act to see that these political prisoners are released. It is called for in the Paris agreement the United States signed. If they are not released, there can be no political solution to the Vietnam conflict. New war will break out, bringing additional costs to the \$2 billion the United States is currently supplying to South Vietnam's military machine.

But there is a far deeper American interest in the release of Saigon's political prisoners. Official United States documents disclose that it is we who created South Vietnam's police system. It is we who decided that all Vietnamese 15 years old and older would be required to carry identification cards, we who linked these cards to a central computer containing 11.5 million biobossiers. It is we who built the prisons and supplied the generators used for torture by electric shock.

An American who visits Saigon today finds himself asking one basic question: What kind of mentality could produce this system of nationwide surveillance, arbitrary arrest, interrogation by torture, sentencing without evidence, imprisonment without mercy?

The answer is clear. And unsettling. It is a mentality which regards human beings as objects to be watched, traced, controlled. It is a mentality which arrogates the right to remove anyone judged a threat from the general population. It is a mentality which uses the language of liberty in public even as it sets monthly kill quotas in private.

For years many Americans believed that lack of democracy in Vietnam did not threaten freedom at home. Today we see the mentality which planned the Phoenix assassinations in firm control of the highest executive agencies of this nation.

Available statistics provide but a faint reflection of the human crisis represented by Saigon's political prisoners.

How is one to measure the feelings of countless mothers who have had sons or daughters taken away, never to see them again? What numbers can convey the sentiments of tens of thousands of human beings caught up in an endless twilight world of beatings, electric shock, rape, shackling, tear-gassing, hunger, thirst and illness? Is there a scale to weigh the desperation felt by millions of other Vietnamese who do not dare speak openly or trust neighbors for fear of being hauled off to prison in the dead of night?

I do not know. I know only that one must grope back to the darkest memories of this century to recall a time of similar mass round-ups of men, women and children, midnight arrests by uniformed police, brutalization of unarmed civilians for their beliefs.

Some time ago a call for the release of political prisoners came out of South Vietnam. Written by a courageous group of Vietnamese intellectuals and religious leaders, it included these words:

"Forty years ago did not great Western writers, religious leaders and jurists raise their voices to denounce Franco's treatment of Republican prisoners? Were not voices raised more recently to plead the cause of prisoners held by the authoritarian regimes of Greece and Brazil? When will a

voice like that of Dom Helder Camarra rise up in the name of the students, peasants, monks, trade unionists, peace activists, journalists, professors and workers indiscriminately imprisoned throughout South Vietnam?"

We have entered a climactic period in the age-old struggle for political freedom. Rulers have dreamed for centuries of finding the means to assert total political control over their populations. Today for the first time they have the technology to do so.

There are certain threats to humanity which transcend national frontiers, political ideologies, racial differences. The imprisonment of South Vietnamese is such a threat. The release of Saigon's political prisoners could mark a turning point in the history of Vietnam.

*Fred Branfman is co-director of the Indochina Resources Center. He recently testified before Congress after visiting South Vietnam.*