

# Con Son: Tiger Cages to Buffalo Pens

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam — "About 5 A.M. Dec. 26 we were handcuffed together and transferred to a ship, No. 504, about 450 or more prisoners. We were put into the hold of the ship, shackled to bars. There were four policemen guarding us. "At 6 the next morning we arrived at Con Son. We had only one small bowl of rice to eat and a piece of sugar. We were kept on the ship until 3:30 P.M. with nothing to eat."

So Nguyen Viet Tuan, a student, described his transfer from Chi Hoa Prison in Saigon in 1972 to Con Son, a prison island 60 miles off the coast in the South China Sea.

To Vietnamese Con Son has long been a dreaded name. For Americans it was propelled into infamy in 1970, when members of the United States Congress and their aides visited the prison and discovered the so-called tiger cages—cells topped with iron grillwork in which prisoners were shackled and mistreated.

The tiger cages have been reported abandoned, and recent visitors say that some have been demolished. Prisoners released within the last year tell of another kind of punishment cell — buffalo cages made from former stables, into which prisoners are jammed and shackled also.

"It was so crowded that we could not move and they shackled our legs," said Nguyen Xuan Ham, a student leader released last October. "The cells themselves are not what is so terrible—What is terrible is the policy there."

"They use common criminals to guard us, and they have absolute control," he said. "They would do all kinds of things. It is impossible to tell just how terrible it was. One person I saw beaten and killed. There is no breeze, no air. It was really terrible."

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Several other prisoners, most of whom asked to remain unidentified, gave identical descriptions of the buffalo cages and explained that prisoners were placed there for refusing to salute the flag.

Despite repeated announcements by the Government and a pledge on the CBS-TV program "Face the Nation" about a year ago, President Nguyen Van Thieu has yet to allow newsmen to visit Con Son.

Several scheduled trips have been canceled.

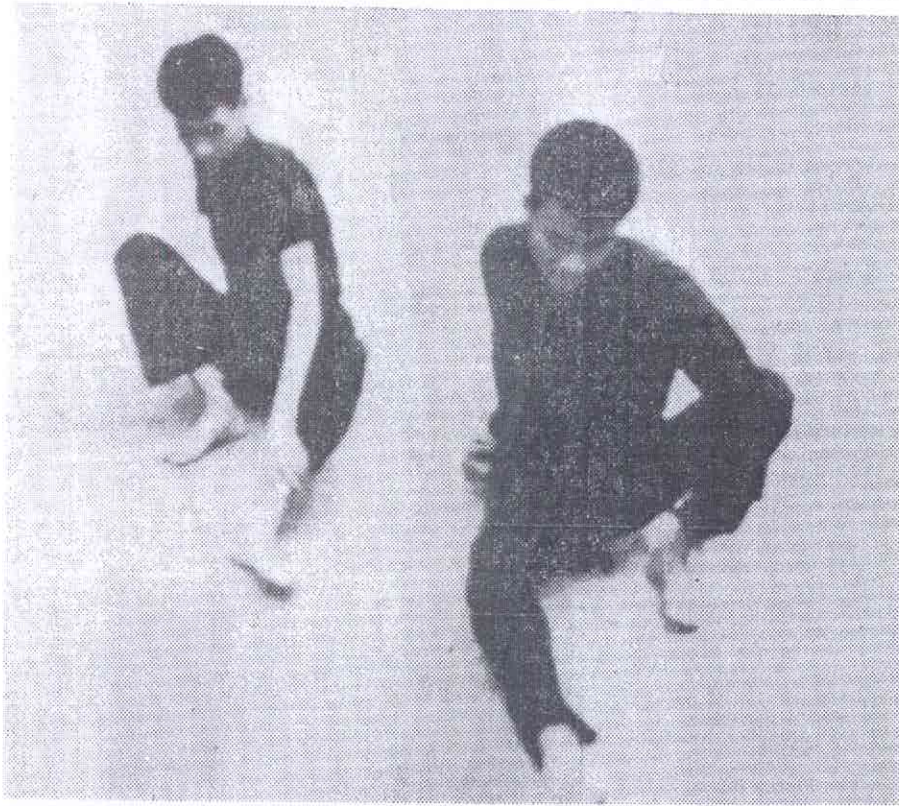
Some Congressional aides described a tightly controlled guided tour in which they saw prisoners only outside or in a woodworking shop, not in cells.

Former prisoners describe other less well-known prisons in gruesome terms. Tran Tuan Nham, for example, spent some time at Tan Hiep Prison until he was released in March.

"In the dry season," he said, "it was really stuffy inside the cells. In the rainy season water would come into the cells, and when that happened we could not lie down and go to sleep. We would have to stand and hold our things in our hands. It would last about two hours after a heavy rain. When it drained off we would have to scrape mud off the floor."

There were severe health problems, he added, and the food was insufficient.

"Each person gets one bowl of rice, no more," he said. "It is the kind of rice if you were here in Saigon you would buy to raise pigs with—brown rice in the hull, and rat droppings in it."



South Vietnamese whose legs atrophied while they were shackled during confinement on Con Son prison island off South Vietnam's coast, can't walk, but drag themselves.