

## Treatment of P.O.W.'s in Vietnam

To the Editor:

SUNDAY

Your editorial of April 18 states: "There can be no question that the President's concern for the prisoners [in North Vietnam] is deeply felt, as is that of all Americans," and adds: "... nor can there be any question that the North Vietnamese have behaved with callous barbarity in their total handling of the prisoner issue."

My organization has been collecting evidence for some time on the condition of prisoners of war in North and South Vietnam. On the basis of this evidence I must challenge the use of the words "callous barbarity."

For some years North Vietnam refused to permit letters and parcels for prisoners or to provide a list of the pilots they held, in line with their ratification in 1955 of the Geneva Convention, which excepted from its provisions prisoners guilty of war crimes or crimes against humanity.

There can be no doubt that the pilots, and the U.S. and Saigon armed forces, have persistently violated not only the Convention on P.O.W.'s but others concerned with the protection of civilians and of the sick and wounded. Nevertheless, in 1968, letters and parcels began to flow and were regularized in 1970 through the Committee for Liaison With Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam, established by prominent members of

American peace movements in New York.

Also, a list of the 339 pilots held has been provided, and of twenty who have died, fifteen of them shortly after being shot down, clearly from wounds received at that time. The total corresponds very closely with the Pentagon figures.

Accusations of the sort of brutality which could be described as "callous barbarity" have come from a minority of the nine pilots released in 1968 and 1969. Their reports when first released, that food and medical attention were adequate, differ strongly from later statements at press conferences laid on by the U.S. armed services.

These concerned understandable harassment by peasants whose vil-

lages had been bombed by the pilots, which ceased when they were taken over by the militia or army. The only specific accusation from Lieutenant Frishman—that Commander Stratton had his fingernails pulled out—was later retracted by him in an interview with Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Seymour Hersh, in late 1970.

"I never said fingernails were pulled out," he said; "I never said he lost his fingernails. In fact, he was hit on the hand and lost... The press said they were pulled out. I never did."

So far as the release of P.O.W.'s is concerned, the Geneva Convention stipulates only that prisoners should be repatriated "without delay after the cessation of hostilities." Hostilities clearly continue and Nixon has no legal justification for demanding repatriation until they cease or, as Mme. Binh has offered, when the United States sets a date for the total withdrawal of its forces, and discussions for the release of prisoners can begin.

PEGGY DUFF

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London, April 20, 1971

[We consider that it was "callous barbarity" on Hanoi's part to have refused—until a few months ago—to make public the names of all American prisoners held in Vietnam or even to permit delivery of mail from their families, in direct violation of the Geneva Convention—Editor, The Times.]