

4 South Vietnamese Describe Torture in Prison's Tiger Cage

NYTimes MAR 3 1973

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 2—A group of recently released political prisoners, reportedly spirited into Saigon secretly, described today how they were beaten, tortured and ultimately crippled during years of confinement at the Government's island prison on Con Son.

One of them, a young man, in describing his year-long detention in the tiny cells that have come to be known as tiger cages, said:

"During that time not a single day passed that we were not beaten at least once. They would open the cages and they would use wooden sticks to beat us from above. They would drag us out and beat us until we lost consciousness."

The prisoners' stories, told in a hospital room to which they had been brought by friends and relatives, reflected the plight of thousands of political prisoners held by the Saigon Government who have become the forgotten people of the Vietnam cease-fire agreement.

Large Group Unaffected

While the accord provides for the exchange of a small number of political prisoners identifiable as belonging to one side or the other, no provision is made for the thousands of non-Communist, anti-Government prisoners held by Saigon because it considers them politically dangerous.

No one is certain how many the Government holds. Some estimates put the figure at 20,000 to 30,000; others go as high as 200,000.

Saigon says it holds only about 5,000 "political prisoners," who, as captured Communist civil servants, come under the provisions of the Paris agreement on the return of civilian detainees. The Communists say they hold only 200 such prisoners. Each side disputes the other's contention.

No provision of the accord appears to cover those held by Saigon who are non-Communist and anti-Government and who do not want to be handed to the other side but merely want their freedom.

The four former prisoners interviewed today said they were members of a group of 124 released on Feb. 16 from Con Son, which is about 60 miles off the Southern coast.

Center of Controversy

The island became a center of controversy in 1970 when two American congressmen revealed the existence of the tiger cages, small concrete trenches with bars on top in which five to seven prisoners were cramped in a space about five feet wide, six feet long and six feet deep.

The former prisoners said they were flown to Bien Hoa, about 15 miles northwest of Saigon, and held in a police station there until Feb. 21, when they were released with orders not to go to Saigon. However, at least 11 were brought here by friends and family and deposited in the relative—if temporary—safety of a Saigon hospital.

Those interviewed assumed they had been released because they were disabled and sick; all said they were convinced they would soon be rearrested.

A Government spokesman, told of the interviews, said he could not comment without knowing the identities of those involved. He said he did not know of any recently released political prisoners.

According to the former prisoners, they had each spent about five years in custody without being tried or granted a hearing.

They denied they were Communists, although two said they were supporters of the Communist-led National Liberation Front.

One who said he was neither a Communist nor a supporter of the front was a slightly built, round-faced man aged 23 who described himself as a Buddhist activist. He said he was a student at the Hung Dao high school in Saigon at the time I vomited blood or until the blood came out of my eyes or ears," having soapy water

of his arrest in December, 1967.

He said he was picked up by the police along with friends who, like him, had been active in what he called the anti-Government "Buddhist struggle movement."

Asserting that he was unable to walk as a result of his treatment while in custody, he related that after his arrest he was taken to the national police headquarters in Saigon and "beaten and tortured on and off for a whole year."

He described the torture as being beaten with sticks "unt

"During the time we were kept in the stables they continued to beat us viciously," he said. "One of my friends, Tran Van Tu, suffered a broken arm. Another man, Nguyen Ngo Thuong, was ferociously beaten on the head."

In December, 1970, the former prisoner related, he and about 80 other sick and disabled prisoners were flown back to Chi Hoa. "I guess I was going crazy at that time," he added, saying that he was also paralyzed.

He remained in Chi Hoa until June, 1971. The treatment there was better at that time, he said, though "once in a while they would beat us just a little."

In June, 1971, he and others at Chi Hoa were informed that they were being returned to Con Son.

"We tried to resist," he said, "saying we were still sick and needed more time to recover. We told them many of us still could not walk and many were still very sick."

But, according to his account, the jailers responded by bringing in the policemen and common criminals who threw tear-gas grenades into the cells. "We all choked and lost consciousness," he said.

They were put on a ship to Con Son. By then the old tiger cages had been replaced by new ones built by an American contractor and paid for by the United States.

The former prisoner said that while the cages were about the same size as the old ones, each cage housed only one person. As a result, he added, "the jailers would not beat us from above but would open the steel bars, jump in and beat us."

Diet: Rice and Water

Throughout 1972 and in the first two months of this year, he said, his daily food ration consisted of "a few spoonful of rice and a little water."

The most recent beating took place last Jan. 6 in Row A and B of the tiger cages," he said. "About 70 prisoners were seriously injured then." He explained that the beatings occurred "because we asked for more food and more water."

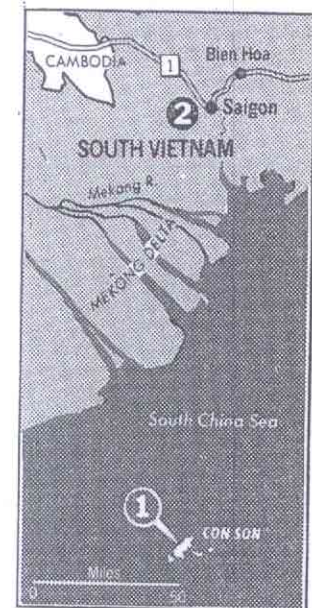
According to the former prisoner, a man named Le Van An was beaten to death in one of the mass beatings last May. He also asserted that in the beating Jan. 6 a Buddhist monk named Thich Hanh Tue was beaten almost to death.

"The prisoners asked that the monk be given treatment," he said, "but they ignored the request and a few days later he died."

When he and the others were released, the young man related, most were transported to various parts of the country, but 25, including him, were kept at Bien Hoa.

Other prisoners at the Saigon hospital corroborated the account with only minor personal differences. All told of torture, beatings and malnutrition.

"Each of us went through a similar ordeal," a 38-year-old former prisoner commented.



The New York Times/March 3, 1973
Con Son, where political prisoners are held.

forced into his nose and mouth, and being subjected to electric shock.

His torturers accused him of participating in anti-Government activities, he added, and "said they tortured us to punish us."

Manacled and Suspended

Another form of torture employed by the police, the young man said, was to manacle prisoners' hands behind their backs, then hang them from the ceiling by the manacles until they lost consciousness.

After a year in custody in Saigon, he said, he was taken to the Chi Hoa Prison in Saigon and installed in what was known as "the movie house" because it was "like a big box and it was dark like a movie theater."

"There they chained our feet and attached the chains to a pole," he continued. "There were between 50 and 100 prisoners. We had nothing to lie on, and it was filthy and dirty and cold. Every day they would open the door and send in a bunch of common criminals who would beat us with sticks and kick us."

Describing life in the tiger cages, the young man said that several prisoners died but he could identify only one by name.

A week after the Congressmen went to Con Son, he said, the inmates were put in what he called the stables—a row of structures that had housed water buffalo.