

Civilian P.O.W. Relives Five Cruel Years

NYTimes MAR 17 1973

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 16— A 37-year-old employe of the Agency for International Development told today of his five harrowing years as a captive of the North Vietnamese—five years, as he described them, of disease, malnutrition and “extensive coercion.”

Michael D. Bengé said in an interview at the State Department and later at a news conference that his captors’ refusal to provide medical care for two of his fellow prisoners, both missionaries, led to their deaths.

Mr. Bengé, his voice wavering and occasionally breaking, said that a North Vietnamese doctor operated on his left foot with a rusty razor blade and scissors, and that another gave up trying to give him dextrose intravenously and told him to drink it from a bowl.

He told of suffering himself from dengue fever, from malaria, from amoebic dysentery and from beri-beri. At times, he said, his teeth became loose, his body hair fell out and the hair on his scalp turned



Associated Press

Continued on Page 4, Column 4

Michael D. Bengé, in Washington, tells of his captivity

ed white. For a time he was blind; for a time he lost the use of his right arm.

For a whole year, he said, he lived near Hanoi in a 9-by-9-foot cell that was painted entirely black and had no ventilation other than a small hole on the floor, through which rats scampered. For an entire year, he saw no other human beings except his guards.

Mr. Bengé is a specialist in the affairs of the montagnard tribes that live in the

highlands of South Vietnam. He is fluent in one of their tribal languages, Rhade, and he devoted most of five years to their welfare before his capture at Ban Me Thuot, in the Central Highlands during the Lunar New Year offensive of 1968.

He was known to his friends and to American journalists who served in Vietnam at that time as an energetic and utterly honest province representative, unawed by high-ranking officials, willing to tell

anyone who would listen precisely what he considered wrong with the South Vietnamese and American programs for the montagnards.

Like most American officials then serving in Vietnam, he did not question the American role; he questioned American tactics and, often, South Vietnamese Government intentions.

Today, much thinner but with his hair once again its normal sandy color, and crew-cut, Mr.

Bengé seemed somewhat overwrought, twisting a pen in his hands as he spoke. He may have to undergo spleen surgery at Bethesda Naval Hospital this month.

At the formal news conference, Mr. Bengé broke down as he was saying, “The United States has a humanitarian obligation and a Christian responsibility to aid the people in South Vietnam and perhaps in North Vietnam.” He urged that any American aid to the North be put into health programs and into rebuilding of houses, not into industrial reconstruction.

The two missionaries died as they and Mr. Bengé were taken from one place to another in the mountains of South Vietnam and then to Cambodia. They were Betty Ann Olsen, a nurse with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Henry Blood, a linguist who was studying montagnard languages.

All told, the marches on which Mr. Bengé was taken—ending the day after Christmas, 1969, in Hanoi—must have totaled nearly 1,000 miles. Much of time, he said, his legs were badly swollen and his skin was covered with ulcers.