

AID Official Recounts Grim Captivity

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An Agency for International Development adviser captured in 1968 told yesterday of marching hundreds of miles on bleeding feet up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to North Vietnam, after two American missionaries died at the outset of the journey.

Michael D. Bengé, 37, of Heppner, Ore., gave a press conference at the State Department the grimmest account of hardship in captivity that has been related publicly so far by a released prisoner of war.

His story foreshadows the sterner, more detailed charges of mistreatment by the Vietnamese Communists which are expected to come gushing out once North Vietnam and the Vietcong release the remaining American POWs. These accounts to come are likely to rebound heavily in debate over future relations between the United States and North Vietnam.

Bengé reached Bethesda Naval Hospital on March 8, where he is still receiving treatment. During his five years of captivity, he said, "I was coerced quite extensively" but said he would withhold information about that "until the rest of our people are out."

He was serving as civilian area development adviser in Darlac Province for the Agency for International Development when he was captured on Jan. 31, 1968, at the outset of the Communist Tet offensive in South Vietnam. Bengé, a former Marine, worked in South Vietnam first as a volunteer for International Voluntary Services,

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a church-financed group, from 1963 to 1965, becoming a specialist in a Montagnard tribe language, Rhade, as well as a speaker of Vietnamese.

Unlike some previously released POWs captured by Vietcong forces, who attributed part of their hardships to the Vietcong's lack of resources, Bengé made a point yesterday of emphasizing that he was constantly held by North Vietnamese troops and was denied medical treatment when, he said, it was available.

During the early periods of his captivity, he said, he was often chained together with Henry F. Blood, a missionary specialist in linguistics, and Betty Olsen, a missionary at the Banmethuot leprosarium. They told him, Bengé said, that at least seven other missionaries "had been massacred by the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]" at the time they were captured.

Blood died from malnutrition and pneumonia in July, 1968, said Bengé. After the group of American pris-

oners was moved across the South Vietnamese border into Cambodia, said Bengé, "it took Betty about five days to die after the Vietcong and the NVA refused to give her any medication at all."

"We were promised," said Bengé, that because "we were noncombatants, they were going to release us." Instead, Bengé said, after Blood and Miss Olsen died, he was marched through Cambodia and much of Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network for eight months, to a point above the demilitarized zone dividing North and South Vietnam.

Then, said Bengé, he was trucked to a camp near Hanoi where he spent a year in solitary confinement. He said he was permitted no mail during his entire imprisonment.

He also stressed yesterday that when he was moved into Cambodia nearly two years before the American incursion into that country in May, 1970, he saw two unending lines of North Vietnamese troops traveling the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As he limped along the trail network on bleeding, swollen

feet, said Bengé, he passed "almost a continuous stream" of North Vietnamese troops "for a month's period of time."

Bengé said he has heard that Americans were concerned about the use of drugs by U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

"You think we have a drug problem?" he asked. "All of the drivers on the trucks" along the trail, and troops at missile sites "were high on marijuana or opium" constantly, Bengé said.

He said he was sometimes displayed by his captors, to be mocked as "an example of Americans who are so used to riding in airplanes and soft living that they cannot walk." Bengé said he "counter-propagandized" in Vietnamese, explaining that he was suffering from deliberate maltreatment. At one stage, he said, he wore the sole off his right foot, lost complete feeling in his arms, and repeatedly suffered from beri-beri and other afflictions.

At present, said Bengé, his health is "fairly good"

although he has an enlarged spleen and may have osteomyelitis. Bengé is a short, wiry man with close-cropped hair. He speaks with a stammer, but friends said he did so before he was captured.

In the prison camp outside Hanoi, said Bengé, he lived in a nine-foot-by-nine-foot cell with no ventilation except for a tiny hole "to let the rats in." He said there were six to ten "rats in with me at all times."

Bengé said that early last October, when prospects for a cease-fire suddenly mounted, the North Vietnamese "tired to fatten us up and put us on a very heavy starch diet."

But "as soon as the negotiations broke down" at the end of October, said Bengé, "our rations were cut once again."

Bengé said that he and other prisoners were hoping that President Nixon and national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger "would not make any concession to the Communists in behalf of our release." As other POWs have said, Bengé said he is "very grateful" for the firm position taken by the President.