

Whom We Welcome

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON—Those with weak stomachs for the unpleasant should stop reading now.

"It is not really proper to call them men any more. 'Shapes' is a better word—grotesque sculptures of scarred flesh and gnarled limbs . . . years of being shackled in the tiger cages have forced them into a permanent pretzel-like crouch. They move like crabs, skittering across the floor on buttocks and palms."

That was a description in *Time* magazine recently of an exceptional group of beings: former political prisoners in South Vietnam. They are exceptional because they exist. Those who go to South Vietnam's prison island, Con Son, rarely emerge in any living form.

The *Time* report, filed by David DeVoss, quoted one of the men as saying he had been arrested one day in a park, with his wife and children. "The police attached electrodes to my genitals," he said, "broke my fingers and hung me from the ceiling by my feet. They did these things to my wife, too, and forced my children to watch."

In the tiger-cage cells on Con Son, the report said, "water was limited to three swallows a day, forcing prisoners to drink urine. Those who pleaded for more food were splashed with lye or poked with long bamboo poles."

That picture of what happens to those arrested by the Saigon Government on political suspicion is the same as many other conscientious and unhysterical observers have given. Some of the evidence is so much more horrible that no paper would want to print it; reading it, no one could doubt that a large number of prisoners in South Vietnam suffer systematic torture and starvation.

But why mention it now? Americans are trying to forget Vietnam, and they have never shown much interest in the torments of the political prisoners anyway. Well, the answer is that an occasion makes remembering a duty. That is the forthcoming visit to President Nixon in San Clemente by the South Vietnamese President, Nguyen Van Thieu.

Delicacy of feeling is a luxury that governments seldom feel they can afford in international relations. If we restricted our relations to those regimes whose standards of justice and decency we approve, it might be rather a limited list. Realism requires us to do business with all sorts of governments, Communist dictatorships and rightist tyrannies among them.

But doing business is quite a dif-

AT HOME ABROAD

ferent matter from giving a symbolic stamp of approval. There are credible arguments for keeping up links with South Africa and Greece, for example, but it would be another thing to invite Prime Minister Vorster or Premier Papadopoulos to the United States.

In the case of President Thieu, it is easy to understand the reason for his visit. He has proved a much stronger, more durable leader than most of us who have been his critics expected. His determination made it possible for Mr. Nixon to get American forces out of Vietnam as he wanted to, without a final political settlement.

But even within the scope of the Nixon policy, it is questionable wisdom to give Thieu the accolade of an American trip. The interest of the United States now is to encourage an indigenous political process in South Vietnam, a peaceful evolution away from the polarization of the war. Our direct military role is about over; now we want to move toward a period of political benign neglect.

President Thieu is of course a polarizing figure par excellence. Neutralism is a crime in his universe. To show a continued American investment in his pre-eminence must inhibit any process of peaceful change—and, once again, unnecessarily commit American prestige. We link our destiny to his.

That is the commonsense political argument against welcoming Nguyen Van Thieu to the United States. But there is also, inescapably, the argument of feeling. The world is full of cruelties, and we cannot cure them, but it is not necessary to proclaim our insensitivity by such a symbolic act.

Estimates of the number of political prisoners in South Vietnam range up to 300,000. The leading American authority, Don Luce, puts the figure at 200,000. Half that, 100,000, is the equivalent in population terms of more than 1 million political prisoners in the United States.

A Frenchman who spent more than two years in South Vietnamese prisons, Jean-Pierre Debris, spoke recently of the apparent American indifference to the problem. He said:

"If they could bring one Vietnamese from the tiger cages of Con Son to the United States, and people could just look at him, that would be enough. He would not have to speak English. There would be no need of press conferences, articles, speeches. If the American people could just see that one man, half-blind, unable to walk, tubercular, scarred, it would be enough."