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Memorandum to: Local area peace workers

Date: August 10, 1973

Subject: Organizing activities in preparation for International Day of Concern,
September 23, 1973

Introduction

Since the signing of the Paris Agreement on Ending the War, one of the major stumbling blocks to a genuine peace settlement has been the refusal of the Saigon government to release the estimated 100,000 - 300,000 civilian political prisoners it holds. Despite the Agreement and the many public reports about the numbers and treatment of the prisoners, including a recent well documented report by Amnesty International, the Saigon government not only refuses to release the civilian prisoners it held in January, but has continued to arrest hundreds more civilians and so far has refused to allow even a semblance of the democratic liberties and freedom of movement called for in the Agreement.

In recent weeks the appalling facts about Saigon's civilian political prisoners, long known to many of us, have begun to gain broad public attention. On July 4 the Today Show did a segment on the prisoners, using a clip from the new film South Vietnam: A Question of Torture. Time Magazine, July 9 and Newsweek, July 16 carried important stories on the prisoners. Jane and David Barton, AFSC staff recently returned from work in South Vietnam, appeared on CBS Morning News, July 16 and gave moving first hand accounts of their work with civilian prisoners in Quang Ngai.

International concern for the political prisoners also is mounting. Many groups in Europe are organizing education and action campaigns for release of the prisoners. In Germany and Italy tremendous pressure was mobilized at the time of President Thieu's visit in spring. Conferences on political prisoners are planned for the fall in Italy and Holland. UAW in Canada has issued a strong statement calling for release of the prisoners. The Australian government has condemned the Saigon regime for its treatment and continued imprisonment of civilian prisoners.

Perhaps most important, concern for release of the prisoners has begun to emerge in the U.S. Congress, in the context of debate on continuing aid to Saigon. United States responsibility for the fate of the prisoners is: many of the civilians were initially picked up in U.S. military sweeps of areas or as part of Operation Phoenix; U.S. advisers, many of them CIA, work closely with Saigon police and prison officials in the process of interrogation and detention (according to recent testimony by William Colby, new head of the CIA, 300-400 CIA agents still operate in South Vietnam, in direct violation of the Paris Agreement); most important now is continuation of U.S. military and economic aid to Saigon, most of which is used to bolster Thieu's apparatus of repression. As one striking example of how aid which is avowedly humanitarian in purpose is misused, it was learned recently by several members of Congress that some money used to construct new tiger cages in South Vietnam came from Food for Peace. Congressional debate on aid appropriations will resume in the fall. The crucial task in the two months ahead is to develop more public exposure of U.S. responsibility for the political prisoners and public pressure to stop U.S. aid to Saigon unless the prisoners are released.

It is in this urgent context that a number of peace and religious organizations have joined in calling for an International Day of Concern and Action for these prisoners. Initially proposed by Don Luce, the idea for the worldwide focus has now been taken up by many groups in the United States and in numerous other countries. People are encouraged to view the entire week of September 16-23 as a period for special activities and, of course, our efforts cannot end until the prisoners are released.

Religious Communities In discussing plans for this time of concern three focal points or special "constituencies" emerge as most important to reach. First, the religious communities - temples and churches. In many churches and temples there will be a natural basis of concern for the fate of the civilian prisoners. There already has been some educational work done on the issue in the religious communities. In many areas education and activity on political prisoners can be linked to work on humanitarian aid to Vietnam already going on in many churches and temples. Simple and effective activities on political prisoners can be planned at churches on the Day of Concern, Sunday, September 23, (or Sunday, September 16) in conjunction with their regular schedule. By the latter part of August there will be a significant list of national religious leadership who have endorsed the call for an International Day of Concern.

Congress The second group for special attention during the week of September 16-23 is Congress. While there is some hope that a combination of mounting international pressure and circumstances in Vietnam may force Saigon directly to release the prisoners, the chances are much greater that possible or actual restrictions on U.S. aid to Saigon will be decisive. In Congressional hearings and debates on aid authorization bills recently, the issue of Saigon's political prisoners has begun to emerge. Many members of Congress question continued aid to Saigon on other grounds as well. The hearings and debate scheduled for fall on aid appropriations is the next clear opportunity for effecting the fate of the political prisoners. The week of September 16-23 provides an opportunity for concentrated and coordinated follow-up on education work already done with Congress. A visit and/or group phone call to your Senators and Representative is a simple and effective way to press your concern about political prisoners and stopping "aid" to Saigon. It also provides a good opportunity for publicity.

Media The third group for special attention during this period is the media - newspapers, radio, T.V. Recently, there have been encouraging signs of increasing media interest and concern about Saigon and political prisoners. Obviously, a public notice about the prisoners on T.V., radio, or in a newspaper, including the simple form of a letter to the Editor, probably reaches ten times as many people as a community meeting. (Community meetings are essential, however, to enlist new volunteer workers in the campaign.) In most media offices there are at least a few individuals who feel some concern for and recognize the importance of the issue of political prisoners. Members of Congress normally pay close attention to what appears in local media to be gaining public attention. There are a number of excellent resource people and documents, including the Amnesty International Report and the Granada film, Vietnam: A Question of Torture, produced for British Television, which can be used effectively in approaches to media representatives. So far, media attention to the issue of political prisoners has not effectively linked this concern to the issue of U.S. aid to Saigon. It is important in all our work to emphasize these connections.

A Few Ideas for Action There already are many ideas circulating for education and action on political prisoners. You should especially see Don Luce's piece Deceiving the American People, a Response to the State Department and Saigon Embassy Allegations on Political Prisoners, July 1973 and the Memo for Organizers on Showing the Film - Vietnam: A Question of Torture for helpful suggestions. Below are a few specific ideas for action during the Week of Concern, September 16-23 related to the three special groups listed above.

1. Work with clergy and laity in local congregations to plan a special observance on Sunday, September 23 - or Friday or Saturday for Jewish congregations - as part of the regular Sabbath schedule or as a special program. Reading the names of prisoners or some form of visual display of the names might be incorporated with the regular worship service or meeting. (see Resource List.)

2. Arrange one or more special showings of the new NARMIC slide show, The Post-war War, Granada film, Vietnam: A Question of Torture, or arrange for a special speaker

on political prisoners. (See enclosed re: Granada film, a list of speakers with recent direct experience in Vietnam is available from AFSC or the Indochina Mobile Education Project.)

3. Organize a Vigil of Concern for Political Prisoners on September 23 or each day during the week of September 16-23 in a public place, perhaps using a symbolic tiger cage to dramatize this concern. (See Resource List for instructions.)

4. Arrange a visitation by religious leaders and others to the local office of your representatives. In addition or as an alternative arrange a group telephone call to your representative in Washington, D.C. (The local telephone company can provide information on costs and arrangements for a conference call.) Make a record of your representatives' responses for use in follow-up activity. (Essential information on the current legislative situation in Congress can be obtained from the Coalition to Stop Funding the War, 110 Maryland Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20002, (202 546-6751))

5. Form a small delegation to visit local media outlets to press for more attention to the issues of political prisoners and U.S. aid to Saigon. A very good document on U.S. aid is "Statement on Continued U.S. Support for South Vietnam's Police and Prison System and Proposals for Ending Such Support." (See Resource List.) Offer to preview the NARMIC slide show, The Postwar War or the Granada film with local T.V. representatives for possible use on their stations. (See Memo for Organizers on Showing the Film for instructions on arrangements for local T.V. showings.) Letters to the Editor and talk shows are two easily accessible means to publicize concern and activities. One particularly effective idea is to write a letter to the editor asking your representatives' views on the issue of restricting U.S. aid until the prisoners are released. Often, this will stimulate others to write their representatives directly and may be picked up for response by the representatives' staff who monitor local papers.