

RE-EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

(A Report from Saigon from a Graduate)

After the South Vietnamese Government collapsed on April 30, 1975 almost all the former officers, civil servants of middle rank and above, Deputies of the National Assembly, provincial officials, leaders of political parties, writers, journalists, important businessmen, priests and monks were detained in the so-called "re-education camps" without any trial. After 1978 another wave of detainees included civilians, former NCO's and others who protested against the new regime, participated in anti-communist activities or were caught trying to escape from Vietnam. Although reports of these camps have appeared in recent years, none has been written by someone who had actually experienced the camps himself, until now.

I. Prisons and Prisoners

All "jails" in communist Vietnam are called "re-education camps". Except for the Central Prison in Hanoi (the "Hanoi Hilton"), none of the others were called prison. Whatever names they may have, they are the places where prisoners are detained, and "re-education" simply means "incarceration. Each district has at least a guard-house capable of detaining a hundred or more prisoners. In Saigon, one of these is the former Dai-Loi Hotel, a five-storey building a mile from Tan Son Nhut airport.

The provincial police departments have from one to several prison camps each, which seem to be largely beyond the administrative control of the Ministry of the Interior. In principle, the Directorate of Management of Prison Camps (literally translated) directs and controls the "re-education camps." Besides the Hanoi (Hilton) and Saigon (Chi Hoa) prisons, these re-education camps are situated throughout north and south Vietnam. In the north, many were established dating from the "Great Purge" in 1947 and from the "Land Reform" of 1955. These bore the title of "production camps" before the current title of "re-education camps."

The exact number of re-education camps existing today is not known, but there are at least 25 such camps where political prisoners of South Vietnam have been imprisoned after 1975. They are located in the provinces of Lao Kay, Bac Thai, Ha Tay, Ha Nam, Ninh, Vinh Phu, Quang Ninh, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe Tinh (all in North Vietnam) and Phu Yen, Pleiku, Kontum, Thuan Hai, Song Be, Dong Nai in South Vietnam. Each of these camps consists of three to five subcamps. Each subcamp is organized as a separate prison with facilities for detention of 1000 to 3000 prisoners. The most famous camp, well known for its cruelty to every North Vietnamese before 1954, was Ly Ba So or Production Camp No. 5, which is now Camp 5 in Thanh Hoa Province.

A North Vietnamese official convicted of a criminal offense who had been working in the Ministry of the Interior told former South Vietnamese officers that there are more than 350 camps and subcamps of all sizes throughout the country, at least five times more than those of the former Saigon regime.

Members of the former Saigon regime were called up for "re-education" in June 1975, mostly in camps controlled by the North Vietnamese Army. About half of these prisoners were moved to North Vietnam in June and July 1976 and detained in NVA camps in such places as Lao Kay, Nghia Lo, Son La, Yen Bay etc. There were about 140 such Army camps in North Vietnam, and each had about 350 prisoners. (These prisoners were former South Vietnamese Army officers of field grade and above, and senior civilians - Ed.) Police officers and civilians of lesser rank were sent to civilian camps under the Ministry of the Interior. After 1978, all prisoners in the NVA camps were transferred to Ministry of the Interior camps also. Although some foreigners from non-communist countries ~~are~~ were permitted to visit about three of these camps which were specially selected for propaganda purposes, no ~~foreigner~~ has ever visited one of the real prisons to see how prisoners were really living and working.

From 1978 to 1982, a great number of former members of the South Vietnamese Government were released. As of April 1983 there are still about about 20,000 of them still detained in three camps in North Vietnam and about 10 camps in South Vietnam. Since June 1980, more and more prisoners were transferred from North Vietnamese to South Vietnamese camps, and as of April 1983 these are only some hundreds of full Colonels, a dozen Generals and some other hundreds of Lieutenant-Colonels still left in North Vietnamese camps.

This does not include another approximately hundred thousand prisoners, as people guess, who were caught trying to escape the country or who were charged with various political offenses, and were detained in provincial jails, especially in 1977-79. Besides, it should not be forgotten that there is a great number of another kind of prisoners, namely the criminal prisoners who suffer the most ferocious prison regime including ill-treatment and hunger, especially in North Vietnam. The many thousands of them are totally unknown to the civilized world and the conscience of mankind, as no human rights report has ever mentioned these unlucky victims of the communist regime in Vietnam.

2. Imprisonment without Trial

To imprison the former members of the collapsed Saigon government, Hanoi assumed they were all guilty of being "reactionary." Hanoi has always argued that the "ones who joined the South Vietnamese Government violated the laws of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." It also contends that those laws were in effect "since 1945" and "all over Vietnam." In fact, however, after the Geneva Agreement of 1954 divided Vietnam into two separate regions, Hanoi's Second National Congress meeting in 1959 promulgated the Constitution of January 1, 1960 with articles obviously applicable only to North Vietnam. Furthermore, in many declarations about war and peace from 1964 to 1974 Hanoi several times criticized the United States about "reconnaissance flights over the skies of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam", obviously referring to the territory north of the 17th Parallel and never including South Vietnam since 1974.

Hanoi's argument is therefore nonsense. There is no reasonable legal basis for imprisoning such a great number of the Saigon Government's members. They had been serving that Government as civil servants or military officers, with an official status, having regular organizations, laws and regulations, appropriate to the definition of "prisoner of war"

as contained in the Geneva Convention of 1949. They should have been treated as such, or at least in conformity with the humanitarian spirit of the Convention.

PAPERS

In ~~papers~~ related to this imprisonment, Hanoi usually referred to the National Congress' Resolution No. 49 of 1961. This Resolution permits the regional police (understood as the Province and District police departments) to concentrate for re-education (a flowery term used instead of put into prison), without any trial, anyone who is against or acts in a manner harmful to the Socialist Revolution. In fact, any local authority at district level, by ascribing the label "reactionary" to a person, could send him to prison for the rest of his life, as the Resolution permits "local authorities to imprison the reactionary in unlimited renewable terms of three years each." (The former Saigon Government permitted provincial security committees of 5 or 6 members to imprison persons "dangerous to society", without trial, for a maximum of four terms of six months each. After two years the detainee had to be brought to a court to be either sentenced or set free.)

3. A Quick Look at the Prisoners

Among the former members of the Saigon Government still imprisoned, the great majority of them had been in the Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence branches. They were considered "dangerous". However, during the past eight years there were many prisoners who could not be considered dangerous from any point of view. Many were insane prior to imprisonment, had lost arms or legs or were blind. About ten percent in many camps were too old or too weak, or suffering from incurable illnesses. Children of less than 16 years were also imprisoned for trifling offenses since 1975, and many are still in the camps. An eight-year old boy in North Vietnam hit a girl of his age with a glass bottle and she died. He was put in jail and is growing up in prison seven years later. He still does not know how long his term will last.

Most of the criminal prisoners in North Vietnam were incarcerated under the title "concentrate for reeducation" of ~~the~~ Resolution 49. They always greatly outnumbered those convicted by courts. Many of them were thieves, professional or amateur, corrupt employees, deserters, smugglers, bandits, prostitutes, blackmarketeers etc. who had not been tried in courts because of lack of evidence or because such action was not necessary. Once every few years, as in ~~April~~ January 1973, April 1975 Or January 1979 there were mopping-up campaigns which swept thousands of people who were on the police blacklists into prison. This does not include many thousand Chinese, or Vietnamese whose parents or grandparents had been ~~Chinese~~ Chinese who were "interned" in the mountainous border areas after January 1979.

Many of ~~them~~ "criminals" were jailed for political causes, usually for protesting against the Party's policies or local officials, or for saying something "unappropriate." They are all classified as "criminals." Many criminals ~~have been charged with~~ charged with trifling offenses have been in prison for 6 or 9 years or more. Many have been released by order of the Ministry of the Interior, but in fact have been retained in prison for months or sometimes years solely by decision of the Camp Headquarters.

Besides, it should be mentioned that there were hundreds of South Vietnamese Special Forces infiltrated into North Vietnam from 1960 to 1970 who were captured. They were sentenced to imprisonment and many are still in jail. By 1973, when the communist side was yelling for the setting free of all communist spies convicted in South Vietnam, not a word from the Free World, even the USA or the Saigon Government has ever been said to demand their liberation. Many of those officers and NCOs have been in jail for 23 years, with no hope of being released.

4. Food and Medicine

Political prisoners from South Vietnam are given a food allowance of 15 kilograms of cereal each month per man, in fact about 14 kilos. In South Vietnam, this 15kg consists of 50% rice and 50% dried manioc and dried potato. In North Vietnam the percentage of rice is from 5% in land-poor areas of Nghe Tinh, ~~and~~ Thanh Hoa to 20% in others. After the flood of 1978 in many camps prisoners had only raw sweet potatoes as big as a thumb to eat for ~~many~~ years. In Thanh Hoa, one of the camps fed prisoners with nothing more than spinach for months, until some died of exhaustion.

Meat is given at about 100 grams a month to each prisoner "if available". The same amount of sugar and about two packs of cigarettes, along with other items such as towels, tooth brushes, toothpaste etc., to be paid for with the month's pocket money allowance of 4 VN dong.

By 1979 most of the prisoners were in a state of exhaustion. They would have died by the hundreds in every camp if their families had not been permitted to visit and supply them in North Vietnam. Permission for such visits in North Vietnam had rarely been given before 1979. Since 1980, most South Vietnamese prisoners in every camp in North and South Vietnam have lived mostly on food supplied by their families. About 50% of them in South Vietnam have never touched "anything" given by the camp.

A criminal prisoner is only allowed 12 kilograms a month, and no pocket money. They are suffering from the greatest malnutrition, or more exactly starvation, which makes all of them look much worse than patients breathing their last gasp after years of malaria. This has caused a very high death rate among them.

There is a great shortage of medicine in every prison camp. Medium emergency cases are always well treated, but chronic diseases were definitely refused. An old man who had been shot by an M79, with the grenade remaining unexploded in his abdomen under the skin and needing only a minor operation, was refused treatment. For eight years the grenade has been frightening his roommates. As with food, most prisoners are relying on medicine sent by their families, except the criminal prisoners, of course.

During eight years, many prisoners have died in camps because of malnutrition and lack of medical care. From 1976-79 the death rate in many camps in North Vietnam was from 1% to 10%, with the highest rate in Van Ban, Tan Lap, Thanh Phong. About a dozen died from beating after recapture during escape attempts. These figures do not apply to

the ethnic North Vietnamese criminals who suffered a much higher rate. In one of the camps in the panhandle area, over 200 criminals died of exhaustion in six months of 1980 alone, some 20% of the criminals in the camp.

5. Working

All prisoners are compelled to work from 48 to 52 hours a week. From 1975-79 in most camps, prisoners had to work from Monday to Saturday and four hours on Sunday morning. In Nam Can (Ca Mau) prisoners worked even 18 hours a day, 7 days a week. Some were killed by accidents in dangerous tasks, especially in the forest, and many were also killed by mines, shells and grenades when they were forced to clear old forts, minefields and ammo dumps, tasks forbidded by the Geneva Convention.

Prisoners who could not achieve the required norm given to him would be punished, usually by cutting down on his food ration or even by locking him up in cells. Other measures included cancelling letter-writing and family visits.

Since 1980 most of the camps have become less rigid on forcing the prisoners to work, such as allowing them full rest on Sundays. However, in the provincial jails prisoners are still subjected to hard and dangerous work. At the same time, most of the remarkable prisoners such as politicians, priests, monks, ministers and even artists were held incommunicado in solitary confinement cells without working.

6. The So-Called "Education."

Only in the first three months after June 1975 was there a political indoctrination program in each camp. Elementary socialism and communist lessons were introduced. Since 1977, once in a while, a subject was given to the prisoners to fill time when the prisoners ~~extremely~~ stayed in camp because of bad weather or no guards available. The camp headquarters always said that "labor is a good lesson, so you don't need to be taught anything else." In fact there was no "re-education" at all as far as education is concerned, just a little cheap propaganda once in a while.

7. Torture

Torture has made the Vietnamese communist security branch famous since 1947, excelling the former French "Deuxieme Bureau," which had been frightening every Vietnamese for years and years under the French occupation. None of the prominent members of the former Saigon Government have ever been put to the rack, except ones who escaped and were caught. However, corporeal punishments applied to prisoners who violated camp regulations were always severe and cruel.

In May 1976 a court-martial was set up in every camp to sentence to death a number of escapees. From two to three of escapees from each camp were condemned to death and shot right away after 5 minutes. However since 1977 none among thousands of escapees in North Vietnamese camps was given a death sentence or

even tried in any court. Nevertheless, many of them were beaten and tortured to death after being recaptured. Others are still alive with scars or broken jaws, limbs and bones.

Nowhere in the world has sadism been promoted, tolerated and used as a most efficient implement of terror as in the prison camps of Vietnam today. The guards are evidently given the green light to commit every act of violence against prisoners who violate even the least important camp regulations. It can be seen every day in any camp, especially in North Vietnam, guards who beat the criminal prisoners in the most cruel ways, usually with stick or rifle butt, sometimes only because of a stolen root of manioc or an ear of corn. Death from being beaten is not rare in North Vietnam.

A common punishment is the "dark cell," a small room where a prisoner is locked up, usually with only short pants on even in winter and one or both legs locked in stocks. They get half or three-quarter rations daily. Light violations such as stealing, protesting against a communist cadre, injuring another prisoner etc. would cost 7 days in the dark cell. Making a sarcastic remark considered to be anti-revolutionary would be worth 14 days. Open protest against communism would mean several months. In each camp there were some who were punished for more than 12 months, and the longest time ever heard was two years.

Dark cells in South Vietnam are usually US Conex containers laid under the hot sun. In the other camps they are built of concrete. At night the guards passing by might do anything to the dark cell prisoners, such as poking with a stick or pouring cold water or urine over their head in winter. In many camps those prisoners were given for each meal four tablespoons of rice mixed into two tablespoons of thick salt water, and a half-litre of water a day. Hundreds of North Vietnamese criminal prisoners were killed this way in one camp in the panhandle area in a short period of time.

Another punishment is to handcuff the prisoners with one hand twisted up from below the back and the other hand pulled down from above the shoulders. In camps such as Song Be, Camp T4 Long Khanh, punished prisoners were "crucified" with hands and legs tied and hung on wooden crosses for days, or have their thumbs tied by electric wires or strings and strained at the ceiling for several hours.

In guardhouses at district level, torture for interrogation is very common. Boatwomen when caught while trying to escape were also beaten black and blue in some areas. In the Dai Loi Hotel in Saigon there was an interrogator who was famous for killing a dozen prisoners by beating and using a bayonet up to the beginning of 1983.

Vietnamese communist police have been instructed to use every possible means to put off every anti-revolutionary action. Vietnam today must be the only country which does not have either a criminal code or a civil code. Everything is based on separate and incoherent administrative decisions and decree-laws whose meanings are usually vague, giving local authorities supreme powers of law enforcing and law interpretation. Most prison guards could not distinguish human

rights from civil rights. They usually said that they prisoners, without "citizens' rights", can be treated every way necessary to keep them in good discipline, and they may not complain despite how badly they were injured.

Evidently, violence with cruelty has been deliberately fostered by Hanoi leaders to frighten their people and to put off every gleam of opposition, defying every criticism from outside.

8. Reintegration

This is no problem for the released criminal convicts. However, hundreds of thousands of former political prisoners in South Vietnam released during recent years will never be reintegrated into the new society in Vietnam, being always reckoned as enemies by the communist authorities who control every office, organization and association.

Former officers and civil servants of the Saigon regime, writers, many artists and musicians etc. are not admitted to jobs in communist government agencies, state farms or industrial plants. They must make their living in the private sector, driving cyclos, huckstering around. In Saigon, with a great number of them, they are not ill-treated and have enough freedom to hang around to earn money, although they are always under close observation.

In the provinces anything might happen to them. In some places such as Tay Ninh they were given sometimes very dangerous work, clearing minefields and barbed wire with bare hands. At district level they are also humiliated and forced to work a number of days a month. In the central provinces around Phan Rang, they were sent to "new economic areas" without supplies, and their former houses were confiscated.

Their children are usually rejected for admission to the university, especially when they are considered to be "hard-core reactionaries" from the former regime. Only a small portion of such children were admitted to unimportant university in Saigon.

Expolitical prisoners in the provinces are not permitted to submit their petitions for emigration to foreign countries where their relatives have completed all necessary procedures. In Nghia Binh Province some who complained about this were sent to prison for many years.

On communist holidays, they were gathered in some provinces for a short period of preventive detention of two to five days. By the end of 1982 hundreds of former Cao Dai detainees were put in prison again when there was a rumor of some Cao Dai movement being developed. Everybody in Vietnam believes that if any critical military situation should occur in South Vietnam, the former government's members, especially officers, would be in great danger. The massacre of Tet 1968 with many thousands of bodies in a dozen mass graves has always been the most frightening experience that no one could forget.

(Saigon, May 1 1983)