

FREED WITH PARALYZED, ATROPHIED LEGS

Saigon's Political Prisoners Tell of Torture

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SAIGON—Displaying their paralyzed and atrophied legs, political detainees from South Vietnam's Con Son Island prison said in interviews Friday and Saturday that they were tortured, chained and deprived of food during captivity.

Thirteen prisoners from a contingent of 124, conditionally released by South Vietnamese government authorities more than two weeks ago, agreed to be interviewed despite being warned by police not to talk to foreign journalists.

The 13 prisoners all said they had lived in Con Son Island's "tiger cages" and told of being beaten with clubs, sprayed with lime, and having to drink their own urine because of thirst. "We were determined to live so that we could struggle for peace," one prisoner said.

The 13 prisoners said they ranged in age from 24 to 53 and had spent a minimum of five and maximum of 10 years in prison.

Asked why they had been arrested, a leader of the group said most "had demanded the right to live and the right to peace." This seemed an acknowledgment that many prisoners supported the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). At another point in the interview the leader referred to "our struggle to liberate Vietnam and bring about freedom and independence."

Although it is possible that the prisoners exaggerated the severity of their experiences in confinement, their physical condition alone seemed to verify much of what they said.

The prisoners were examined by an American doctor, John Champlijn, who was formerly associated in Saigon with Children's Medical Relief International, a charity organization which operates a plastic-surgery unit here.

"The prisoners are not only paralyzed below the waist," Champlin said, "but they are also insensate below mid-thigh level. I think their leg problems are due to disease, atrophy and malnutrition. A number of them have deep scars around their ankles which they said came from leg irons."

Champlin said some prisoners thought they had tuberculosis or intestinal diseases, but he could not verify this because he lacked proper instruments during the examinations.

With proper food, exercise, and physical therapy, Champlin said, "the younger prisoners have a better chance of fully recovering their use of their legs than the older ones."

Champlin said he had listened to them discuss their imprisonment and "nothing they said flatly contradicted the results of my examination."

The prisoners said 124 of them were flown to Bien Hoa, 15 miles northeast of Saigon, on Feb. 16.

Five days later they were taken to a Buddhist pagoda in Bien Hoa. They were then warned against going to Saigon and talking to foreign

journalists but were permitted to visit families not living in the Saigon area.

They were released on condition that they return to Beign Hoa police headquarters 10 days later with two relatives who would then be responsible for their whereabouts.

The reason for their conditional release is unclear. The leader speculated that the South Vietnamese government was preparing for an inspection of Con Son in accordance with the ceasefire agreement and was therefore evacuating the most seriously ill prisoners.

“We were released so that the public would not be aware of the horrible conditions at Con Son,” the leader charged.

In a separate interview last week, a political prisoner at the prison ward of Quang Ngai province hospital said he had heard that about 20 or 25 Con Son prisoners were transferred to the Quang Ngai prison in mid-February. He said he was told that many of these prisoners were paralyzed below the waist.

Located about 150 miles south of Saigon, the Con Son Island prison is considered the least pleasant of South Vietnam’s major prisons. It is a collection center for political detainees most firmly opposed to the government.

During the interviews, one man, apparently the group’s leader, did much of the talking. His statements showed much political sophistication as well as a deep commitment to the NLF.

For example, at the end of the interview, reflecting the NLF’s political line on the ceasefire, he said, “Although we were tortured and mistreated to a point near death, because of the peace agreement and

the spirit of national reconciliation it calls for, we are willing to forgive and forget what has happened to us.”

Through the interviews the prisoners were calm and matter-of-fact. They appeared anxious to tell their story, and asked visitors to feel their emaciated legs. They also showed scars on their hips and buttocks which they said were caused by beatings. The prisoners moved about by sliding along the floor on their hands, either dragging their legs behind them or holding them in front.

One prisoner pointed to a visitor, and, smiling, said, “My leg is smaller than your arm.”

The group seemed well-organized, for as the leader spoke, two other prisoners supplied dates and details for him when necessary.

The following account is based on descriptions by the leader and other prisoners of their experiences in confinement:

Some prisoners said that immediately after arrest they were tortured with electric shock or beatings. Prisoners were forced to drink water, then were struck on their bloated stomachs. Most were held at other prisoners before being transferred to Con Son.

At Con Son they were sometimes beaten for not saluting the government flag. One prisoner said his hands were tied behind him and he was then suspended from the ceiling by his hands and beaten continuously for two hours.

He said he was then taken to a stone cell of about 17 square yards and was tied to a pole with 25 other prisoners. He was then beaten again, along with the others.

The leader of the 13 prisoners said prison officials often let common criminals, whom he called “trustees,” perform the beatings. He said there were about 10,000 political prisoners at Con Son, and that all received beatings.

During this period political prisoners were given two meals a day, each consisting of a small portion of rice and fish paste which was rotten and generally covered with flies. “We forced ourselves to eat what they gave us because we were determined to live,” the leader said.

Prisoners said they felt “a strong sense of solidarity” and tried to help each other survive. They said they massaged each other’s sore muscles and even gave artificial respiration when necessary.

“The trustees saw our solidarity,” a prisoner said. “That enraged them. It moved them to do even more harm to us.”

“When on Feb. 22, 1967, prisoners refused to salute the government flag, they were moved to Con Son’s “tiger cages”—cells of about 3 yards by 2 yards whose ceilings consisted of bars.

At first, they said, there were four prisoners per cell, but each week four more prisoners were added, until by the third week there were 12 prisoners per cell.

“This was the toughest period,” the leader said. When prisoners wanted to lie down, they had to do so on top of each other. “When the people on the bottom couldn’t stand it any further, we switched,” one prisoner said. As he explained, other prisoners gave a physical demonstration.

The prisoners said at this time the supply of food and water was so small that they occasionally drank their own urine. Rice was given to

them not in bowls but literally in handfuls, and they had to eat quickly or be beaten, they said.

Prisoners said that when they were taken out of their cells for beatings, they purposely fell down so they could quickly eat grass as they lay on the ground. Authorities then grabbed them by the neck and tried to take the grass out of their mouths.

The leaders said that in February 1972, the prisoners demanded medicine and better food and authorities reacted by pouring lime on them. As a result, “people started to vomit and sneeze blood. After a time there was about [half an inch] of lime in the bottom of the cave.

Prisoners said by this time they had seen several prisoners die as a result of beatings.

They said that after a visit by two U.S. congressmen to the tiger cages in June 1970, they were moved to cells which had formerly been cattle stalls. These were made of cement and still contained animal troughs, the prisoners said. There were 10 inmates to each cell.

In October 1970, the prisoners said, a group of American military doctors visited them and assured them that from that point on they would receive better treatment. Instead, the leader said, the next month the prisoners got one of their worst beatings: one lost an eye, another broke his arm, and many had head injuries.

Eighty prisoners were moved from Con Son to Chi Hoa, a prison in Saigon, in December 1970—probably as a result of protest about conditions following the visit by the American congressmen, the prisoners believe.

At Chi Hua prisoners said they were examined by an American doctor but were not given treatment or medicine.

In June 1971, the prisoners requested permission to let their families visit them and to get medication. Instead, they said, police fired tear gas into their cells to force them out, then loaded them onto trucks and then boats and returned them to Con Son.

After demanding medical treatment and better food at Con Son in October 1971, the prisoners were moved to “new tiger cages” — isolation cells which had recently been constructed inside the prison. The prisoners said the new cells were more comfortable than the old ones and food also improved. Beatings, sometimes causing death, continued, they said.

They said they did not know if the tiger cages were still occupied. According to their reports, they are now being used as storage areas.

Prisoners said that on Feb. 13, 1973, prison authorities announced the signing of the ceasefire, and the next day 124 inmates were taken to Bien Hoa.

At the end of the prisoners’ long narrative, the group’s leader made his statement about “forgiving and forgetting,” and added: “We also want to thank the American labor and student movements for contributing their own blood and bones to our struggle to liberate Vietnam and bring about freedom and independence.

During almost their entire internment at Con Son, prisoners wore shackles, they said. They lost the use of their legs after five months to three years.

The prisoner said they were aware of one man still at Con Son who is now over 70 years old and has been imprisoned for 18 years without ever having a trial.

Although many observers here believe prisoners in South Vietnam generally undergo a process of politicization while incarcerated, the interviewed prisoners either said they did not have much chance to talk about politics or refused to discuss this subject.

The group leader said they could be beaten for talking too much among themselves, and while in the tiger cages they thus spent most of their time staring at drops of water on the walls.

