

Excerpts of statements on torture in South Vietnam prisons

Following are excerpts from statements by two Frenchmen, Jean-Pierre Debris and Andre Menras, who were prisoners in South Vietnam for two years. The two men, who were freed Dec. 29, 1972, spoke at a meeting in Paris on Jan. 20. A story about their tour of the U.S. appears on page 1.

Comments of Jean-Pierre Debris:

First of all I want to tell you about our arrest. During the first week we spent in jail, we were surrounded by ordinary prisoners, who are used by the Saigon administration to guard and beat up the political prisoners.

Still, even in that first week, while we were lying in our cell, I was thrown a little bottle of oil which the Vietnamese use for relieving pain after you've been beaten up. Around this little bottle was a note written in very good French. It said, "Thank you, on behalf of the Vietnamese people," and was signed, "your comrades in arms."

We learned a long while afterward that this came from a cell where the so-called "rebels" were kept, those who refused to salute the Saigon regime's flag. They were beaten and tortured for it.

We met them eight months later, during the first Tet celebration we spent in prison, in February 1971. After months of complete isolation, we were able to go down into the yard where the latrines were. It wasn't a favor on the part of the prison guards; it was just carelessness: They were too busy celebrating Tet.

So we went into the yard and there we met the brothers who had sent us the lotion. They lived in awful conditions and now, for Tet, their families had been able to visit them and had brought them all kinds of good things to eat. They insisted on giving us everything, and we celebrated together. We sang the song of unity and solidarity.

Then the brothers from the isolation ward also came down. These were political prisoners who had been brought back from the tiger cages in Poulo Condor. Normally, they were never allowed to go out into the sunlight; but were kept in solitary confinement, in cells without windows or light. But that day, the first day of Tet, they could come down into the prison yard. So we saw, the whole jail saw, for the first time, these hundred prisoners from the tiger cages.

Prisoners couldn't walk anymore

And in what condition! They had to crawl down, because they couldn't walk anymore; their knees had been broken. They dragged themselves along the ground with little wooden benches they had made. In the sun they had to close their eyes completely because they'd been blinded from so many years of darkness. Their faces were haggard and lined, their bodies gaunt and emaciated. They were wearing tattered prison uniforms, the standard black pajamas.

Frenchmen tell of Vietnam torture

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Debris and Menras went to South Vietnam as volunteer school teachers in a French government program. After two years working in Da Nang and Saigon, they became outraged by what they saw as the corruption and tyranny of the Saigon government.

With more courage than prudence, they climbed a memorial outside Saigon's National Assembly, waved a National Liberation Front flag, and scattered leaflets calling for immediate peace. They were immediately arrested and taken to Saigon's Chi Hoa prison, where they remained until their release and deportation last December.

Their message is simple, and they present it with quiet earnestness and impressive attention to detail. There are perhaps 200,000 political prisoners in South Vietnam, they say, and

thousands of them are being reclassified as criminals so that they won't be freed under the terms of the cease-fire agreement.

Their detailed description of life in President Thieu's prisons, where even children are held as political prisoners, is both absorbing and chilling. Excerpts from a taped statement they made are on this page.

Debris spoke briefly about the Catholic church's response to the prisons. He had no good words for the Catholic chaplain who visited his prison. He brought bread for the 200 children there, "but always with, how you say, in one hand rosaries" for the children to take with the bread.

Debris said he knew of no attempts by the chaplain to alleviate the prison conditions, but that the chaplain saw his job as making converts both to

No one made a sound when they arrived. Even the trustees who guarded them were astonished. A regular prisoner threw them a box of candy. The trustees didn't move. They let him do it. Other regulars threw delicacies they had been brought: oranges, fruit, even a few ducks.

We watched all the prisoners throw everything they had to these people, who had come back from the death camps. We even saw an American, an American GI, who was in the isolation ward. He had nothing to give, no money, he received no visits. All he had was his clothes. He started to undress and, piece by piece, he threw all his clothes to these prisoners from Poulo Condor.

This policy of "re-education," as the Saigon government calls it, is aimed solely at breaking patriotic Vietnamese, sapping their strength, breaking them not only physically, but especially morally. There are many ways to kill a man.

At Eu Quoc, an island prison for seven years until 1971, prisoners were shot at with machine guns. When the prisoners demanded better food, jeeps with machine guns mounted on them were driven into the prison and they would fire on the prisoners, forcing the prisoners further and further down. And each time there were dozens of dead and wounded.

At our prison, Chi Hoa, and elsewhere, there are other ways of killing people: By giving them nothing to eat, by rationing their water, by beating them, by torturing them, by leaving them in tiger cages.

Tiger cages' father returns to camp

In our last months at Chi Hoa, we saw something which was still more tragic. On Nov. 15, 1972, Colonel Nguyen Van Ve came back. He had been exposed in 1969 and 1970 as the "father of the tiger cages" at Poulo Condor.

These tiger cages were denounced in 1969 by all the international press, by American papers and by French papers. I even remember seeing a picture of this colonel in a Paris magazine that labeled him the father of the tiger cages. (Actually it was the French colonialists who were the first to build them.)

In 1967, this colonel was director of the concentration camps at Poulo Condor. After the scandal of the tiger cages, he disappeared, only to re-appear in the "Phoenix" campaign, which was aimed at destroying the ranks of the National Liberation Front by assassination.

Despite the exposure of the tiger cages, they're still there, and what's more, they've been rebuilt. We saw prisoners... at Chi Hoa who had come back from the tiger cages to be "nursed." There is an infirmary at the Chi Hoa prison. When they arrived at this infirmary, they were told that

there was no medicine. The American supplies weren't being sent any more. There were no dollars for medicine for political prisoners, but there was \$400,000 to build new tiger cages in camps numbers seven and eight, at Poulo Condor. There is an American company in Saigon which is building tiger cages at the present time—new, improved models.

The cages are too low for the prisoners to stand up. Also they put three to five prisoners in each one, so there's not enough room for them to sleep. They have to take turns lying down while the others crouch. The cages are kept in completely dark rooms without ventilation; most of those who manage to live through the experience are completely blind afterward.

Friends of ours who've lived in the cages have told us how they were forced in desperation to wash themselves with their own urine, even to drink their own urine.

The food rations decrease each year. In August 1972 it was still a pound and a quarter of cooked rice a day; now it's less than a pound, and the rice is soaked in sea water and mixed with sand to make it go further. The only thing they get with the rice is a pinch of salt—not enough—no vegetables, no meat, of course, no fish. They used to get a bit of pickling brine, but now they don't even get that.

If anyone so much as asks for an extra bowl of rice, there is ferocious repression. Beside each tiger cage is a container of quick lime which the guards throw onto the prisoners, and which burns their skin. They also use grenades of noxious gas and tear gas. Then, when they've used all this, they beat and handcuff them, with their wrists behind their backs. We know people who've been kept handcuffed like this for years because they refused to salute the Saigon flag.

So on Nov. 15, at Chi Hoa, the colonel came back. He brought into the prison a hundred members of the tac squad of the Saigon police, armed with bamboo shields, helmets, bullet-proof vests, pistols, clubs, even grenade launchers. They entered every cell containing political prisoners.

Each cell had from 60 to 100 people piled on top of one another. They divided each cell into tiny groups, separating people who had known each other for years. During this separation and change of cells, a lot of prisoners disappeared completely. They even mixed the Catholic students with members of the National Liberation Front, so they could be classified as communists; and all the political prisoners were mixed with ordinary ones.

Then they took away the files of these prisoners, so that no one will be able to prove that they were political prisoners and not ordinary criminals. This was done for a very good reason. If there is a cease-fire (since declared), the criminal prisoners won't be released. If the political prisoners are indistinguishable from the ordinary ones, they won't be released either.

In the last few months of our imprisonment, we realized that the colonel was preparing for a cease-fire. By mixing the prisoners, putting them out of sight, he was going to do away with the political prisoners, who should be released upon a cease-fire.

Saigon fascists, from that moment on, we saw a difference in the attitude of our jailers," said Menras. "They stopped beating us and they took precautions with us."

"We also saw how the torturing of the students had been denounced, and how the New York Times and the Daily Mirror (London) printed articles which spoke of this torture. At that moment the torturers stopped their work. They permitted families to see their children, who up to that point had been kept in unknown prisons. And then we saw how silence closed in after that... silence; and then the tortures started again."

Don Luce, who was first to reveal the "tiger cages," said Americans can most effectively register their protest by urging their representatives and senators to investigate prison conditions in South Vietnam.

'27 prisoners were tortured to death'

There are a lot of examples of this. We knew a student Nguyen Ngoc Phuong, who was at Camp No. 7 at Poulo Condor. He was tortured to death by officials at Poulo Condor called "specialists." We know of at least 26 other prisoners who were being tortured to death when we left.

On Dec. 10, 16 Catholic students began a hunger strike to protest: They weren't allowed to go into the yard to get sunlight or to have visits from their families. On Dec. 26, less than three weeks after they began their hunger strike, they were taken away on stretchers to the tiger cages at Poulo Condor.

We also saw 53 political prisoners, who had already been brought back from tiger cages at Poulo Condor, returned there. They were among those who had been brought to Chi Hoa to be treated, but as I said, there was no medicine.

There is a nurse at Chi Hoa, but she had no medicine and did nothing. So when these students went there, the 53 prisoners accompanied them. They went back to the tiger cages in the same condition they had left them: Their legs broken, their joints paralyzed, asthmatic and leprous, and most of them infected with tuberculosis.

We knew that, for these prisoners we had lived with for nearly a year, this was a death sentence. We know we will never see them again. The president of the Association of Vietnamese Students told us upon our departure, "We have to bring back all those who've been deported. Otherwise we'll never see them again. We know that we're going to be taken away too..."

On Dec. 28, three days after the convoy left with the Catholic students and the 53 prisoners, the French consul came to see us, to tell us that we were released and would be deported to France.

It was really unbelievable, unthinkable, that after what we'd seen of the conditions of imprisonment of our brothers, we should be released now. And then when we were to go, we refused to leave, we didn't want to leave our comrades in arms, who had helped us so much. They ran the risk of being taken to the security room to be tortured; this was a room which, when American delegations came, they transformed into a movie theater.

Then some political prisoners came to see us and told us that we had to go, to bear witness of what we had seen, to tell of the tortures, the beatings, the assassinations, the policy of slow death. All this has been going on for dozens of years and no one speaks of it in the papers. And that's why we're here today.

I should also tell you that, in the last nine months of our imprisonment, we saw a new type of political prisoner arriving at Chi Hoa. Up till then we had seen mostly members of the National Liberation Front, patriotic Vietnamese, usually peasants. But from about March 1972 we began to see lawyers, intellectuals, professors, students even Catholic students, Buddhist monks; in fact, an entire category of prisoners that, until then, we had not been accustomed to seeing. At first, we were extremely surprised, then we understood: "These people belonged to the neutral 'Third Force' that, just now, Thieu is so afraid of."

A form of torture 'The plane trip'

There exists a form of torture which leaves fewer traces than the others, but is much more painful and lasting. The victim, after having been bound hand and foot, is plunged into a big metal barrel filled with water up to the neck. Then the police, armed with heavy wood hammers, beat against the sides of the barrel with all their might.

The water acts as a conductor of these blows, which penetrate to the internal organs of the body, especially, the liver, the heart and the kidneys. People who have been tortured this way several times never really recover.

Then, there is what the police call the "plane trip." After the victim's wrists have been tied together behind his back, a long very strong rope is inserted through the cords around his wrists, while the other end is attached to a pulley on the ceiling. By pulling on the rope the police can make the victim swing in the air by his wrists, which have been tied together behind his back. The effects of this action are heightened by an occasional black-jacking, or cigarette burn on the more sensitive parts of the body, particularly on the genital parts.

A girl student who was subjected to this torture twice in succession, could not bend her arms or wrist joints, and her shoulder blades were fractured. The same was true of a young male student, who after having been subjected to practically every form of torture, tried to commit suicide. He was afraid that he would drown and sign the paper they tried to force upon him.

He first tried to open his veins with a piece of glass, inside his cell. He failed, however, and fainted. When the trustees saw the blood trickling under the door, they saved him in spite of himself. He tried to kill himself by biting his tongue as hard as he could, and beating his head against the walls of the cell. Here again, he failed, a fact he seemed almost apologetic about. However, he signed nothing.

There is yet another form of torture which is practiced on war prisoners. The prisoner is stripped naked and made to sit on a chair with a hole in the seat. A lighted oil lamp—making it possible to raise and lower the flame—is placed underneath the chair. If the prisoner refuses to talk, the flame is raised higher and higher, until it burns the anus.

Some 75 per cent of the prisoners tortured in this manner do not survive since the only possibility of saving them would be an operation on the abdomen that would permit the intestine to function normally.

While rape has always been the fate of the little peasant girls considered as "communists" by the Saigon authorities, at present the same thing is true of girl students.

A young woman student, whose fiancé was now in the Chi Hoa prison, told us that she had been raped by a veritable monster who forced a living eel into her vagina. He was known to have done this type of thing with other young women, using, among other instruments, filled Coca-Cola bottles, which he had shaken well before opening.

This same young woman also told us that she had had lizards let loose to run over her body, cigarette burns on her breasts, etc. She too tried to commit suicide. At first she tried to hide from her family and from her fiancé what had happened to her. But she couldn't keep it from them, and three months later she tried again to take her life. At present she has been moved to another prison.

One student told of having been subjected to torture with needles. Seated at a table, his hands were attached to the table, with his fingers spread so far apart that he could no longer move them.

Slowly, by means of light taps on a piece of cardboard, needles were inserted under the fingernails. Once in place, a sheet of tissue paper was attached to each needle, after which a ventilator just opposite was turned on. The breeze from the ventilator set the tissue paper in motion and this, in turn, made the needles move, under the nails.

The student told us that he stood it for 10 minutes before fainting, but added that even the most hardened could not stand it for longer than 15 minutes.

This then is the long road that the Vietnamese patriots must travel until they reach extermination. How do they do it? This is what impressed us most. It also is for us the greatest lesson in courage we have ever learned. It's their smile, the smiling will power of these patriots. Systematically, scientifically, their bodies are destroyed.

But their spirit is not destroyed; they continue to resist. After 10, 15, 17 years—we met one man who had spent 17 years in these jails, but who still smiled, nevertheless.

The symbol, perhaps, of this struggle, of this suffering, of these Vietnamese patriots in the concentration camps of the South is the children whom we met at Chi Hoa, because there are children there also.

The youngest among them, whose name is Dong, is six years old. His mother was killed by American bombing in the Delta region. His father, suspected by the Saigon regime of being a communist sympathizer, was incarcerated in Chi Hoa and brought the child with him. The child had no relatives to take care of him.

The last news we have of Dong dates from Dec. 20, 1972, when we heard him cry out in the disciplinary se where he was imprisoned with his father, with his friends. He was shouting slogans with the adults, to protest the living conditions that were forced upon the political prisoners, to protest the lack of food, the imprisonment of people in unknown places, and to demand that the prisoners be allowed to take walks outside, to take baths in water, in real water, not in urine. They were demanding water, unadulterated water, larger rations of rice, of properly cooked rice.

We also met another little prisoner who considered us his brothers. As 12 years of age, he had already been in three prisons. His crime was attempting to steal a rifle from a G.I.

He had been taken by the police, who tried to make him say that he was part of a group that was stealing arms. The police also tried to get him to say where arms were being stored, who were his parents' friends, and, then, they wanted him to reveal names. First they gave the kid candy, then they gave him money, and then they hit him, because he still wouldn't talk.

The boy told us how the policeman who beat him justified his hitting him. He told him: "Your hands are little, but they are big enough to hold a rifle. That's why I'm hitting you."

'40 kids organize, shout slogans'

We saw a section of 40 kids in Chi Hoa who organized themselves and who, when they were mistreated, got together, like adults, and made up slogans. At night when the prison camp was sleeping, they shouted these slogans so that the adults in all the different sections could hear them.

They also put together little information bulletins which said, for example, "To day when we went to take a bath, trusty so-and-so hit so-and-so. He was hurt. Today the food ration was lowered."

We saw how these kids, at an age when little French children are playing marbles, are already adults. We saw how the prison authorities repressed them. No difference between them and the adults. They were put into the same category: hard-headed rebels.

There's a camp at Dalat, a concentration camp for children, where at this moment 800 young boys and girls are being held. In this center the prison authorities try as well to force the children to rally to the regime: They must salute the flag and work. There is a special torture for the kids.

Dalat is situated on the high plateau, a place where it rains a lot and the nights are cold. The children who are obstinate, who refuse to salute the flag and to sing the "re-education" song, are put into a cell. They are bound so that they cannot move, and then twice during the night, they are drenched with water and left like that to dry off.

Psychological tactics are often used on them as well, especially on the younger ones. They are isolated without food or water for a day or two and then the kids are told: "Your mother is sick; she is very sick. Do you want to see her? Do you want to see your mother? Well, it's easy. You just have to salute the flag and go out with the others or the hill, and then you will see your mother."

At the last transport of prisoners to Dalat we received word that there were four children who persisted in refusing to salute the flag; the others couldn't hold out. It's impossible to hold out for long. If you do you are dead...

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