

Three S. Viet Prisoners Tell About Torture

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QUANG NGAI, South Vietnam—When a woman in the prison ward of the province hospital here had a violent seizure, other prisoners quickly tied her limbs to the corners of her bed so she could not hurt herself.

“You don’t have to hit me,” the woman said frenziedly to an imaginary interrogator. “I don’t know anything. I’m telling the truth.”

She furiously pounded the bed with her fists and legs, twisted her body from side to side, then arched her back until only her feet, arms and head touched the bed. Fifteen minutes later three other women patients were having similar convulsions.

This scene took place during a visit to the prison ward this week. When we left, the four women were convulsing simultaneously, as other patients tried to hold them down or simply stared at them.

There is little doubt that the seizures are at least a psychological reaction to being tortured with electricity at South Vietnamese police interrogation centers months or years before. It is highly probable the seizures are induced by suggestion: one prisoner’s convulsion prompts another’s.

One male patient said he sometimes witnessed five ten seizures a day. He said most patients had undergone electrical or other kinds of torture.

Through a combination of unlikely circumstances, it was possible to talk to many of the ward’s 24 patients, three in some detail. The three said they had no idea when they would be released and they had been tortured.

Though all patients were being handled as political prisoners, they ranged from a 17-year-old boy who said he was arrested while fishing

at night to an 18-year-old girl who said she was captured while going on an armed military mission for the National Liberation Front.

David and Jane Barton, two American hospital workers who are allowed to enter the prison ward to give cursory care to patients there, estimate that there are from 2,000 to 2,500 prisoners in the Quang Ngai prison and the Quang Ngai interrogation center. Prison ward patients come from these two facilities.

Mrs. Barton said that in a two-year period of visits to the prison ward, she had heard of only one patient who was not listed as a political prisoner. She believes that at least 90% of Quang Ngai's detainees are classified as political prisoners.

There are no precise figures available on the number of political prisoners held by the South Vietnamese government, but most observers believe the government now has in custody somewhere between 40,000 and 70,000. Unquestionably, the number is below 100,000.

It is likely that many of the prisoners nationwide, like some of those we talked to in Quang Ngai, were arrested arbitrarily, never received a trial, and are being held without knowing when they will be released.

Government policemen in Quang Ngai are particularly active, for the province has always been a NLF stronghold, and some of the war's bitterest fighting has taken place here. (My Lai, scene of a 1968 massacre by American troops, is a few miles from the province capital.)

It is virtually impossible for any villager outside the province capital to avoid at least fleeting contacts with the other side. According to the accounts of prisoners, this circumstance alone seems to have provided justification for some arrests.

The 17-year-old boy, for example, said that one night in mid-November police surprised him while he was catching fish with the aid of an oil lamp, and accused him of working for the NLF.

He said the police took him to a district interrogation center, then told him to tell the truth. He said he had nothing to tell them. The police then forced him to drink hot water until he was bloated, then beat, kicked and jumped on his stomach until he was on the point of dying.

The boy said he had been beaten three more times since then, and had been threatened with further torture if he did not tell the truth in the future.

It is a sign of the curious combination of humane and inhuman treatment given the prisoners that he was in the hospital ward to be treated for an abscess on his foot apparently unrelated to torture. His foot was heavily bandaged and he was on crutches.

There is no question that some of the prisoners have worked and even fought for the NLF. The 18-year-old girl said she was on an NLF operation with four other girls 10 months ago. They walked into a government ambush, three girls were killed, and she and another girl were wounded.

For 23 days afterwards, she said, she was alternatively interrogated, beaten and given political lectures. "After being beaten, I felt dead for a long time," she said. Since she had been caught on a military operation, she admitted her support for the NLF to her interrogators.

The girl remains quietly defiant. Asked who would win the war, she said, "The National Liberation Front will win." She said she now talks about politics with other prisoners, and believes that very few were really working for the NLF when they were captured. "The prisoners help each other a lot," she said.

Another prisoner, a 19-year-old girl, said that in 1970 she was arrested while carrying rice and vegetables to market and was accused of transporting food for the NLF.

She said she was tortured with electricity. Electrodes were attached to her fingers and feet. "It was such a jolt that I lost consciousness," she said.

She was also forced to lie on her back with her hands bound behind her while awful-tasting water was poured down her throat. "They gave it to us to make us fat," she said. Then interrogators hit her on her stomach until the water came out of her nose and mouth. She said her last beating occurred 14 months ago.

She said she had seizures, sometimes as many as four a day, but could not explain the reason for them. She broke her arm while thrashing about during one fit, and was getting the arm set in the prison ward.

"When I was captured, I was really frightened," she said. "but since I was beaten, I am no longer afraid. I know what it is."

Like other prisoners we talked to, she said she had not been told when she would be released. She knew about the ceasefire, she said, but doubted it would bring about her freedom.

Prisoners said torture took place at the interrogation center, and that once patients were moved to the prison they could expect not to be tortured again. Some patients were tortured immediately after their arrest, but never again. Mrs. Barton said she thought more than half the patients in the prison ward were suffering from ailments caused by torture.

Police decide which prisoners may go to the hospital ward. It is possible that police consider bribes and behavior as well as the severity of a prisoner's illness as criteria for selection. Mrs. Barton said, "We feel the police have not let the seriously ill prisoners go to the prison ward."

Although conditions in the prison ward were somewhat worse than in other wards of the Quang Ngai hospital, they did not seem unbearably bad. The 24 patients were spread over 14 beds crowded together. In the past, the Barton said, the patients were chained to their beds, but this requirement was dropped last year.

During our visit hospital employees carried a stretcher into the prison wrd. The stretcher held tin contains with rice and vegetables—a substantial dinner by Vietnamese standards. The patients appeared well fed.

Medically, they did not seem so well off. The prison ward is never visited by a doctor, and rarely by nurses. During our visit a cadaverous one-legged monk, himself a prisoner and suffering from an advanced case of tuberculosis, put an injection into the hip of one of the female patients. She writhed, while without looking he emptied the syringe's contents into her.

Three of the women prisoners had babies that lived with them in the ward. Two infants were 2 and 3 weeks old respectively. With the aid of other prisoners the women had given birth inside the Quang Ngai prison.

Only female prisoners in the ward suffer seizures. White pieces of cloth were tied to the four corners of many beds—if a patient seems on the verge of a seizure, other prisoners quickly tie the strands to her arms and legs.

For Vietnamese, any sort of emotional display is rare. While it is unlikely that the convulsions are entirely voluntary or the result of a physical condition, they do seem to reflect the traumatic effect of electric shock.

The first girl went into convulsions apparently after hearing us talk about the phenomenon with another patient. She twisted so violently that at one point she slipped off her bed and was hanging on its side by the straps tied to her ankles and wrists.

Another convulsing patient seemed to be reciting points of her interrogation. "They captured me in the mountains," she said. "Only two months... don't have two names... I don't know anything... I don't know anybody... It wasn't my fault... I don't know two people there."

Mrs. Barton said that once when several prisoners were having fits at the same time in her presence, a police guard walked over to her and said matter-of-factly, "They've been given electricity."

Visitors do not come often to the prison ward, Mrs. Barton said, because they fear that police will then suspect them of having contact with or working for the NLF.

