

# In Vietnam's Gulag, The Captives Die A Slow Death

By DOAN VAN TOAI

One evening about five years ago I was at a concert in Saigon given by the National Concert Orchestra of North Vietnam. Suddenly, down the aisle marched Communist secret police, all carrying guns. They came up to me, and said: "Let's go outside."

They led me into an office of the theater. They said: "Are you Mr. Doan Van Toai?" and I answered: "Yes." They didn't say anything more but forced me to stand there for about an hour. Later they took me to police headquarters and said: "We are arresting you." I asked: "Why are you arresting me, what have I done?" but they only replied: "The best thing is for you to think and remember. It is for you to work out."

I was taken to a small cell. It was very dark—the only light coming from a small hole in the wall through which I could breathe fresh air. The first night I slept easily as I was still optimistic because I knew I hadn't done anything.

Each day I made a notch on the wall and soon I had been there for seven weeks. My only visitor was another prisoner—a girl who every morning would bring me a bowl of rice.

The first day she came I was very hungry and began to gulp the rice down but I soon realized they must have mixed some sand with it. It was impossible to eat. When they finally called me for questioning I asked the official why they had put sand in my rice. "So you remember what you have done wrong in the past," he said.

They made me write an account of my life and every morning would take me to their office where the air was very fresh. I wrote pages and pages so as to postpone the time when I would once more be shut up all day long.

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I had first become involved in politics when I was a pharmacy student at Saigon University in the 1960s. At that time I believed Thieu was head of nothing but a puppet government in the hands of the Americans. I became interested in the struggle for peace at Saigon University and was elected vice president of the student union. When the student union president was arrested, I organized student demonstrations all over Vietnam against the Thieu government. For this as well as other activities, I was arrested and imprisoned many times by that government.

During these years the National Liberation Front had approached me to join them. But I refused, preferring to support their goals independently through the student union. At the end of the war in May 1975, I was asked to join the finance committee of the provisional revolutionary government. I agreed, but in a split over policy I soon resigned. (Although the Communists never told me this, I believe that my resignation was the cause of my arrest.)

After I finished my account I was taken to Le Van Duyet prison in the center of Saigon where I stayed for over two years.

I was put in a small cell with 50 others. People died every day through lack of medical attention and in the evening you could hear the voices call out: "Warden, this is room number three, someone has just died."

I was worried about my French wife and three sons and was anxious for them to leave Vietnam. I knew there could be reprisals against them and through one of the prison wardens—a former friend—I sent a letter to my wife saying not to wait for my release but to take the children to France. And if she had to write a letter to the authorities denying my existence, then she must.

When she finally left for France in June 1977, I felt easier. Then I heard the news of my mother's death. She had been denied medical treatment because she had one son in prison and another who had left with the Americans. I was very sad and very angry and through my friend again sent a letter to the chief of the secret police in Saigon saying: "You are responsible for my mother's death. I have now been in prison for 27 months and I still don't know what I have done to oppose the Communists. If you find out nothing then you must release me." More important, I had my friend bribe an important official.

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Later I was called to the prison commandant's office and was told I was released. He said that the government needed me to cooperate with them. "If we give you an exit visa you must tell the West how wonderful everything is here. And how well we treat our prisoners." I agreed with them, but only I knew what I would really tell the West.

I was given an exit visa but didn't leave Vietnam immediately. In prison I had given up hope for a free Vietnam. I had become very angry and very ashamed to have ever supported the NLF. I wanted to get rid of the Communist regime. But then I said to myself: "I think this because I have been in prison for over two years. Before I leave I must find out if the rest of the country feels the same way."

I discovered that everyone hated the regime because they were always hungry and were even less free than they had been under President Thieu. In Vietnam today there are over 800,000 people in prison and in so-called re-education camps. In Cambodia the political prisoners were exterminated quickly but in Vietnam they die slowly.

When I was released my friends still in prison asked me to tell the world what is happening and, if no one will stand up to the Vietnamese Communists, to send them cyanide to put an end to their agony. "Help us to die quickly," they said.

In Vietnam nobody dares to protest for fear of arrest. Few people abroad speak because they fear for the safety of their families still in Vietnam.

But even if it means the death of myself and my family, I must do something for the thousands of prisoners who die each year and the millions of people who have to support the unsupportable and accept the unacceptable.

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