



INSIDE-OUT

Same Struggle - Same Fight!

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Vietnamese Women in Prison -- A Struggle for Life and Liberation

In order to try to help create a broader sense of unity within prisons and between the prison movement and the overall struggle against imperialism, the following article is being printed. This article is a condensation of a chapter, "Women in Cages," from Arlene Eisen-Bergman's book, Women of Vietnam. This book is dedicated to the growing solidarity between women of Vietnam and women of the United States, and we feel that this one chapter in particular is important for prisoners here in the U. S. to read. This chapter deals with the thousands of women who have been imprisoned by the Thieu regime in South Vietnam, the conditions they are forced to deal with, and the strength that is drawn from the unity of these sisters. This unity stems from a common understanding of who their enemy is and their determination to struggle against and stand up to this enemy in solidarity and sisterhood. There are great lessons to be learned from this book and from the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people as they continue to fight for their freedom and right to self-determination against the U. S. imperialists. Women of Vietnam was published by People's Press, 2680 21st St., San Francisco, CA 94110.



Today, there are at least a quarter of a million political prisoners in Thieu's jails in South Vietnam. Nearly half are women. Some were arrested because they rejected the sexual advances of Thieu's soldiers. Some were arrested because they got caught up in indiscriminate round-ups. Some were arrested because they supported the Provisional Revolutionary Government (which the ruling class has termed the "Viet Cong.") Hardly any of these women have had trials and none have definite sentences.

Regardless of the situation at the time of arrest, there is only one basic reason why these people remain in jail -- systematic terror and police-state tactics are the only way Thieu maintains his power. People see Thieu as the man responsible for the continuing separation of their families, for rampant disease and plague, for the packs of rats that have invaded even the rich neighborhoods of Saigon, for corruption and heroin addiction, for the betrayal of the country. Financed and supported by the U. S. government, Thieu continues to violate nearly every article of the Cease Fire Agreement because he knows that enforcement of the Agreement would quickly bring an end to his rule. The Cease Fire Agreement provides for the release of all political prisoners. Thieu has reclassified these prisoners as "common criminals" in order to get around his treaty obligations.

With 92% of his budget coming from the U. S. and two million people unemployed, Thieu's power depends entirely on U. S. support. There are currently 24,000 U. S. military personnel in South Vietnam disguised in civilian clothes. Most of them "advise" Thieu's police and military apparatus. The Thieu regime has 1.1 million men in the army, and admits to having at least 120,000 policemen. There are four categories of police, plus hundreds of thousands of part-time informers who are regularly forced to give information to the police.

In Saigon, there's a policeman on every corner who spends his entire day stopping people at random and checking their ID cards. Anyone out after curfew is arrested. Every night thousands of police fan out through Saigon and do house-to-house searches. Every household has a brown book in which each person in the family is listed by name, sex, job, and ID card number. When the police enter the house after curfew, everyone is brought out, and subject to arrest if those present don't match the list in the brown book.

Once arrested, a victim has little hope of being released until she or he signs a confession. That is the period when most of the tortures take place. Through torture the police aim to get a confession and the names of other people who are "communists." The torture is carried on so systematically and on such a mass scale that it has been impossible for Thieu to hide it. Debris and Menras, two Frenchmen jailed for two years in Chi Hoa, reported the special torture techniques reserved for women. They name Duong Van Chan as the man who ordered that live eels be inserted into the vaginas of women students. Young women are invariably forced to stand naked for hours in front of masked interrogators. The tormentors undertake endless intimate "examinations;" run lizards over women's bodies; use cigarettes to inflict burns on nipples and methodically burn off pubic hair; uncap coke bottles, shake the contents vigorously and then stick the bottle into the vagina; and take pleasure in rape, especially of virgins.

Those who survive interrogation face the continuous horror of conditions calculated to execute the prisoner slowly, over months, even years, of time. There are special prisons for women -- Phu Tai and Thu Duc -- where thousands of women must make army uniforms and mosquito nets in exchange for a bowl of rotten rice each day. In 1969, for the first time, women were taken to the infamous prison island of Con Son, also called Poulo Condor. They went on the boat which shuttles between Saigon and the island, traveling with the rats in the hold, chained on the floor perpetually damp with excrement, like the Africans in the old slave ships.

In the face of torture, starvation, rats, vermin, disease -- treatment that has crippled, maimed, and mutilated minds and bodies for life -- women inside these jails become living models of the infinite capacity and possibility for human beauty and resistance. Every morning, prisoners are supposed to salute the Saigon flag, but many prefer to face beatings and torture. A proverb etched in the walls of one cell begins to explain why these people are willing to sacrifice so much to maintain their dignity:

The mountain is only so high, the river stops.
Our capacity is without limit.
The stars can move.
Our will is unshakable.

In private, a prisoner recited the preferred version of the last sentence:

The Americans can go to the moon,
but they can never get past the determination
of the Vietnamese people.

At Con Son, prison guards beat many women for singing a liberation song on December 20, the anniversary of the founding of the National Liberation Front. One of them, Hien Luong, wrote a poem celebrating the defiance of the sisters who had been brutalized, and following is a portion of that poem:



Such power in such frail bodies --
Does it come from magic?
The next day, reprisals.
Aged mother,
Little sisters, barely thirteen years old,
Beaten with the rest
Just for having sung.
"Who led the singing?"
Answer: a willfull silence.
Cornered between the wall and the hard ground
They fell unconscious.
Awakening,
Into their ears glides the sweet lullaby of an elder sister
Like the voice of the native village.
Suddenly, on your trembling lips
Blooms the rose of a first smile
That no chains nor shackles can imprison!

Minh was 22 years old when Jane Fonda interviewed her in Hanoi during the summer of 1972. She was there for medical treatment. Minh told why she had joined the NLF: "We have come to learn that we cannot be happy until the U. S. troops withdraw from Vietnam and until we can determine our own lives." Her job was to hide soldiers. She had been captured by Thieu's police three times, three times tortured, and three times she had managed to escape.

She told how Saigon soldiers forced her mouth open, poured soapy water down her throat until her belly got very swollen and then jumped on her stomach. During her interview with Jane, Minh suddenly bolted for the door. The other women in the room ran to her side and tried to calm her. She began to fight like an animal, very powerfully, and flail her arms. Finally, they had to pin her down to the ground where she continued to struggle. Then she began to pant, heavy like a large animal, and her voice, deep and angry, began to repeat the same thing over and over again very rapidly. Jane reported: "I will never forget the sound of her voice. I looked up and everyone in the room was crying and I asked what was happening. And they told me she was reliving the torture. They said she had these seizures regularly, every day, sometimes five times a day. I asked what she was saying and they told me, crying in admiration, that she was saying, 'It doesn't matter what you do to me, I will never speak. We shall be free. It doesn't matter what you do to me, I will never speak. We shall be free...'"

Huyn Thi Kien also refused to talk when she was tortured. With the help of friends, she escaped to Hanoi, where she received an artificial leg to replace the one her torturers cut off. She explained how she was able to defy the torture: "I thought very hard and decided that I would rather die than let my comrades get arrested and be killed because of my information... (They cut off one leg and after a month, she received word that they were planning to do the same with the other. The night before she knew she would be interrogated again...) I thought very hard about the terrible things that would happen to me the next morning. I thought many things. I thought about how I joined the struggle to liberate the families and myself, my brothers and sisters and the villagers and the country in general. I thought that if I died, many others will live and fight for the cause I have followed. I was determined to keep my loyalty! 'I cannot be bought off by the enemy, I cannot say anything about my comrades, I cannot betray the country. I would rather die.' Thinking these things, I fell asleep, and in my mind I was ready to face anything." The next morning, mistaking her faint for death, her torturers did not completely sever her leg. A sympathetic prison nurse saved her and helped her to escape.



Some people do eventually talk -- unable to endure torture indefinitely. But neither Minh nor Kien are "super-women." They represent hundreds of women who maintain their defiance in the face of torture because they can gain unlimited strength from feeling themselves part of the struggle of an entire people. Every act of resistance becomes a "mind vitamin" -- the prisoners say "thuoc bo"-- for the rest. A prisoners explained how unity among the prisoners makes resistance possible. "We never started a hunger strike alone, separately. By the tens, by hundreds, and some-

times the whole prison went on strike. We even refused to drink. . . That's what they were afraid of, the obstinate will, not of one, but of the whole collectivify. . . if need be, ready to die in support of their demands. To let a whole prison die would rouse public opinion, they would get into trouble from their bosses, since their job was not to do away with detainees, but to "convert" them. Especially as we always took care to present apparently harmless demands at first. . . But the main thing was to compel them to give up to prove that they were not masters here. "

Women like Minh and Kien dedicate their lives to the principles of national liberation, refusing to compromise, because they know this is the only way to survive. They maintain their resolve because they're sure of victory. This certainty makes them know that their death, if it becomes inevitable, will not be wasted. They know they'll be avenged and they cannot conceive of betraying either the memory of other fallen comrades or the struggle of those who fight on.

Women in prison, living in rags without even a shread to clean themselves during menstruation, find ways to comfort each other. Their solidarity, combined with the atrocities of the guards, and the humanity of NLF' cadre in prison, have made many women join the liberation forces while in prison. Their determination to remain free becomes legends to inspire the growing strength of their sisters.



Pardons, or Them and Us

Most of us have understood for a long time what kind of people end up in US prison camps--the poor, minorities, working people--and who does not--the people who can afford to buy good lawyers, or the people who make the laws which put property ahead of people. Those who are in a position to exploit other people will make the laws which make it possible for them to continue to exploit; if they should get caught (as has been happening with the Watergate gang) and can't get out of it, they will end up with the easiest prison life possible.

Never was this contradiction in the so-called Amerikan justice system made clearer than with the pardon of the chief murderer Richard Nixon by his replacement (who continues all the same policies of exploitation around the world), Gerald Ford. Brothers in Graterford Prison in Pennsylvania, in response to this joke pardon, made up the following form letters.

_____, # _____
(name)

(institution)

(address)

(city) (state) (zip)

(date)

Gerald A Ford, President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D. C. 20003

Dear President Ford:

In the interest of the concept of Equal Justice as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States, I, _____, request a pardon for my "crimes against society." My family has suffered just as much as Mr. Nixon's if not more, and I received no mercy from the media in their reporting of my case. (I do not believe that Mr. Nixon was ever forced to be separated from his family.) As a United States citizen, I ask that the same type justice be dispensed to me.

Sincerely,

(signature)

The following form letter is designed to be used for friends or family.

(name)

(address)

(city) (state) (zip)

(date)

Gerald A Ford, President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D. C. 20003

Dear President Ford:

In observance of your granting a pardon to your predecessor, Richard M. Nixon, I, _____, request a pardon for _____ for his crimes against society.

It is my belief that the "Equal Protection Clause" of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States apply to all of the people and/or citizens (former President or pauper) of the United States of America. It is inconceivable to me that you, as President, would advocate or grant to one citizen a right or privilege, under the law, that you would deny to another citizen, under the same law.

_____ and his family have suffered irreparable damages. The forced separation of _____ and his family is a hardship that has not been experienced by Mr. Nixon and his family.

As a United States citizen and in the interest of Equal Justice as guaranteed by the Constitution, I ask that a pardon, allowing the same justice, be dispensed to my _____, # _____, confined at _____.

Sincerely,

(signature)

We doubt, given the nature of Ford and the system that he serves, there will be any pardons as a result of these letters. Certainly, no harm can be done by mailing copies to the White House. We feel, however, that the value of these letters comes from their educational purposes--we would suggest getting them out to people who need to have a clearer understanding of the real nature of "justice" in this country. Copies sent to newspapers in the communities would also be useful, and, of course, the basic letter can be varied to suit specific circumstances.

Punitive transfers

A recent decision in the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York state says that there must be a hearing before a prisoner is transferred from prison to prison as a form of punishment. The case involved a brother at Attica who, after circulating a petition about prisoners being denied legal assistance, was transferred to Clinton prison. He filed a suit against the prison administrators concerning being transferred without a hearing, based on being denied "due process" of the law. His case was dismissed by the District Court, and that decision was overturned by the Appeals Court. The case is now under consideration by the Supreme Court.

The Appeals Court judge, Irving R. Kaufman, said that if a trial determines that a prisoner's transfer was punitive, the "hardship involved in the mere fact of dislocation" may be sufficient to make the summary transfer a denial of due process. He also said that a prisoner could suffer "real hardship in being shuttled from one institution to another" because he was moved away from his home and family, removed from friends he had made in prison, forced to adjust to a new environment and frequently put in administrative segregation when he arrived in the new prison. Finally, the judge declared that "we cannot condone the idea that the mere fact of incarceration permits a prisoner to be punished at the whim of those charged with his confinement."

We recognize that the courts are never going to "protect the rights of prisoners"; if that were going to happen, most people now in prison wouldn't be there in the first place. At the same time, we believe in using whatever tools are available for fighting back against the system--and we see this decision as one possibly useful tool. Transfers have long been used as a way in which to break up a growing unity among prisoners, and, while prison administrators will always be able to trump up some reason to transfer individuals as a divisive tactic, this ruling will mean that their tactics will be a little more difficult to apply.



AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL