Pacifists suffer under Thieu regime

The war in Vietnam--raging as much as it was prior to the January, 1973 Paris peace agreement--now includes a new front according to a number of journalists and public speakers.

Two ex-prisoners of the Saigon government--Ton That Lap and Vo Nhu Lanh--spoke at the University of New Brunswick Jan. 12 urging international support for the release of political prisoners held in South Vietnam.

Vietnamese pacifists are incarcerated, they said, as opponents to the Nguyen Van Thieu regime which perpetuates the war.

Dick Brown, writer for the University of Toronto Varsity, in an article last year said a new aspect has developed in the hostilities.

In addition to the fighting in the rice paddies and jungles, wrote Brown, a new front gradually opened up in the war during the most recent years: the massive incarceration, usually without trial, of civilians.

By DAVE SIMMS
Brunswickan Features Editor
[Adapted in part from the University of Toronto Varsity.]

Amnesty International, a non-partisan organization based in London, England, gathered information on andworkedto secure the release of political prisoners throughout the world. The group claimed there are more political prisoners in Vietnam than anywhere else.

Amnesty quoted as a minimal figure "not less than about 70-75,000" with the maximum "more than 100,000."

Thieu's government admitted holding just less than 36,000 civilians but denied any were political prisoners. Theiu's figures included four national and 37 provincial jails but excluded 500 detention centres in the country.

These centres were funded by the United States. The U.S. in 1974 spent approximately $20.4 million on police and prisons in South Vietnam.

The claim of no political prisoners, wrote Brown, rings hollow due to a reclassification in 1972 when those held for political reasons were re-categorized as criminals. Prior to that, a Vietnamese director of prison administration had told U.S. officials 64 per cent of the 35,000 "official" prisoners were classified as "communists."

Neutralists or pacifists in Vietnam were treated as communists by the Thieu government, said Brown.

"The facts are," said Amnesty International, "that perhaps 20,000 or more (National Liberation Front) members and sympathizers are in detention, although not all adherents to the NLF can be called 'communist'."

Many tens of thousands of other civilian prisoners are held because of alleged communist sympathies, but are not communists at all.

"Most of them are simply innocent victims of faulty intelligence. Finally, several thousand people are detained precisely because their views are at variance with those held by the Saigon government."

The Provisional Revolutionary Government in Hanoi and the Saigon-based Committee to Reform the Prison System quoted a figure of 200,000 prisoners.

After watching itself waste 17 years as a member of the International Control Commission in the pointless charade of enforcing the 1954 Geneva conventions in Indochina, it was no wonder a strong sector of public opinion was sceptical about Canada's newest peacekeeping role in 1973 on the International Commission of Control and Supervision in Vietnam.

Few objected later when Mitchell Sharp, then external affairs minister, announced Canada was pulling out of the ICCS, mainly because there was no peace to keep and the Americans had their troops and POWs home.

The rest of the western world had long since washed its hands of the mess, and now Canada had its excuse to get out.

The forgotten war had begun. However, for a handful of people, a mission to keep Canadians and the Canadian government from forgetting was just getting underway.

The International Committee to Free South Vietnamese Political Prisoners from Detention, Torture and Death had long since moved into its cubbyhole at the

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He was arrested for singing

Late one night in 1970 Ton That Lap, a South Vietnamese singer and teacher, returned home after playing at a pacifist song rally and was arrested by the Saigon government.

He was imprisoned in a cell so small he was unable to stand and only after two months was he informed he was being held at Saigon police headquarters. All his clothes and possessions were taken.

During incarceration he underwent "collective torture"--beatings by a group of men while his hands were tied and eyes covered. He would awake covered with blood and hearing the cries of prisoners in adjacent cells.

Lap--president of the Vietnamese student composers association--and Vo Nhu Lanh, chairman of the Vanh Hanh Buddist University students' association, were ex-prisoners of the Saigon regime who spoke to more than 60 at the University of New Brunswick Jan. 12.

They were conducting a Canadian tour to raise support for international efforts to have political prisoners in South Vietnam released according to the 1973 Paris peace agreement.

A third former prisoner--Nguyen Long--was unable to travel from Montreal for the session. Long, a 66-year-old internationally known lawyer, had suffered a knee injury.

The three were Vietnamese neutralists or members of the third political force recognized by the Paris accord in addition to the Hanoi-based Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) and the Nguyen Van Thieu regime in Saigon.

Lanh said their six-movement popular front opposed the war and continued United States involvement in Vietnam. The U.S., he said, is present only to protect their economic interests and opposed to the development of the country. Thieu, he said, was a U.S. puppet.

The Paris agreement ordered the release of all political prisoners within 90 days of signing. Lanh said he was held longer than this and there are still 200,000 prisoners incarcerated.

More arrests of pacifists have been made, he said, which makes the problem of concern to

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Vo Nhu Lanh and Ton That Lap (right) spoke at UNB Jan. 12.



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