

# Westerners Ignore Vietnam 'Gulag'

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Ignored by many commentators in the West, the Communists from Hanoi have imposed a brutal dictatorship on the subjugated people of Vietnam.

Such is the message conveyed by trained observers who have escaped the Communist police state and arrived in Washington to tell their story. The picture they provide confirms in full the fears of those who warned against a Communist takeover—which perhaps explains the fact that their statements have received so little notice from those who helped torpedo all resistance to that takeover.

One especially impressive witness is Nguyen Cong Hoan, a former elected official of the unified Communist government of Vietnam. Prior to the Communist victory, Hoan had been a leader of the "peace" faction in South Vietnam, and a bitter critic of the anti-Communist Thieu regime. After a few months of living with and under the Communists, however, Hoan escaped in a small fishing boat, making his way to Japan and then to the United States.

"In Vietnam today," Hoan told a subcommittee of the House of Representatives, "it is the dictatorship of the Communist party. The government can arrest, execute, deport, expropriate, tax, withdraw rice allowance, fire from employment, ban from schools, forbid travelling and do many more things to the people without specific charges or explanation. All basic rights are suppressed."

Among the elementary liberties that have been destroyed, Hoan said, are freedom of expression and political activity. All mass media are tightly controlled by the government. There is pervasive censorship. No one may express any thought, in word or writing, contrary to the official line. All religious groups are subject to intense persecution. No one may change place of residence without permission. Anyone who violates any of these strictures is liable to severe punishment, including incarceration in so-called "re-education" camps.

Most serious of all, as Hoan explained it, is the massive program of purges, imprisonment and forced labor with which the Communists are attempting to beat the nation into submission. He estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 people have been slaughtered outright; that there are another 200,000 or more in the "re-education" camps; an additional 200,000-300,000 who have been processed through these camps, released, but kept under the equivalent of house arrest; and perhaps one million or more sent to "new economic areas" to perform forced labor.

Hoan's analysis of what is happening in Vietnam is fully supported by Father Andre Gelinus, a Jesuit priest who lived in Vietnam for 19 years and stayed on for 15 months after the Communist vic-

tory. Father Gelinus told House investigators a harrowing story of mass imprisonment, starvation, and ruthless warfare against dissent in every form. He estimated that there were as many as 300,000 people in the "re-education" camps. These, he said, are in reality concentration camps and brainwashing centers.

Father Gelinus also described the total shutdown of all media of communications and the gigantic bonfires in which books, magazines, reports and other products of the non-Communist culture were systematically destroyed. He told as well of disappearances, suicides and starvation—to the point that cats and dogs had vanished from the streets of Saigon, having been killed and eaten.

Especially chilling is Father Gelinus' portrayal of the total despair that spread through South Vietnam as it became evident the Communists were imposing a ruthless tyranny, assaulting not only essential freedoms but the ties of family and religion. In an interview with *L'Express* of Paris, reproduced in the *New York Review of Books*, Father Gelinus gave the following picture of popular misery:

"Entire families killed themselves with revolvers. A former police officer shot his 10 children, his wife, and his mother-in-law, then himself. A father, after explaining to his family at dinner that they had to put an end to their sufferings, distributed poisoned soup. Some came to see me before such suicides to ask whether it was a grave sin. Here and there someone who had been saved just in time would tell what had happened. A young woman told me that she had awakened in a hospital corridor piled with hundreds of bodies. Those who were still living had their stomachs pumped out. Group suicides went on for several weeks."

This gruesome picture is confirmed as well by Theodore Jacqueney, writing in *Worldview* magazine. A vehement critic of the former Thieu regime, Jacqueney has interviewed numerous escapees from Vietnam. He describes prevailing conditions in the Communist prison camps as "Gulag-like," with countless deaths from malnutrition, disease, and general mistreatment.

"Former internees," Jacqueney writes, "describe deaths from malnutrition, beriberi, dysentery, malaria, forced-labor-induced exhaustion, required minefield sweeping, and suicide. Former prisoners say that camp inmates commonly suffer from limb paralysis, vision loss, and infectious skin diseases like scabies caused by long-term, closely packed, dark living conditions. They also witnessed cases of re-education camp insanity brought on by a combination of oppressive living conditions and incessant demands for 'confessions.'"

All in all, the evidence of what is happening in Vietnam seems overwhelming: the Western reaction, for some mysterious reason, is not.

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