

Brazil — behind the warm sun

The Reverend Fred Morris went to Brazil in 1964 as a missionary of the United Methodist Church of the United States. Ten years later he was working with the urban poor in Recife, a city in the north eastern part of the country. Whilst there he was arrested and tortured. In this interview* he explains what happened and analyses the violence of the secret police, the government and the international business corporations through his Brazilian experience.

On June 24, 1974, *Time* magazine published a full-page article on Dom Helder Camara, a Catholic leader in Recife who has been very active in the fight against the use of torture. The article was very complimentary toward the Brazilian regime, and since I occasionally did a little part-time writing for *Time*, the army officials in Recife wrongly assumed I was the author.

In fact, I didn't even know the article was going to be in the magazine until I bought a copy and read it.

But as a result of this article, I was called for questioning on three different occasions. Finally, at the end of the third period of questioning, the colonel said that if I avoided any further contacts with Dom Helder, stopped all journalistic activities, and minded my own business, everything would be all right.

But it wasn't. On the morning of September 30 I left my apartment with a very close Brazilian friend, Alanir Cardoso. As we were getting into my car, about a dozen men materialised out of nowhere, with machine guns and .45 calibre automatics. They hustled us into the back of a station wagon, covered our heads with cloth hoods, and forced us to lie down on the floor.

In the prison we were separated and I was put into a five by seven foot cell. After a few minutes I began hearing my friend's voice screaming in obvious pain. Of course, I knew as soon as they got us what we were in for. Torture is very common in Brazil. It's what happens to everybody who falls into the hands of the army. It's just what they do to warm you up.

Actually, I was still nurturing some hope that they might just be trying to scare me. But as I lay on the floor feeling the unreality of it all, I found myself very self-consciously and deliberately repeating Psalm 23. It wasn't that I thought God was going to come down and deliver me, but it was reassuring to know that he was with me.

In Brazil it's usually a three to four week period of torture, for openers. After that you may get out, you may be dead, or you may be in prison for years. All this was going through my mind — and here was my friend screaming.

I kept reminding myself that there was more to me than anyone could touch. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of the death..." They could kill me, but I wouldn't have to be afraid because I was in God's hands.

Ten to fifteen minutes later they came and got me. They took me to one end of what was the torture chamber and handcuffed my hands behind my back. I had a hood over

my head and had no clothes on except my shorts.

There were a number of men in the room who immediately began yelling questions at me. Hoping that as an American citizen I might not have to go the whole route, I reminded them of that fact and said I wanted to see the American consul. That was the first time they hit me. The guy hit me in the belly and said, "Here's your consul".

They began asking where I was going, where I was taking my car, and what I was doing with my friend Alanir. They weren't interested in the answers; they asked the questions and started hitting me before I

meaningful I'm not sure how much the questions were to gather information and how much was just simply a structure in which to intimidate me. Anyway, shocks with the electrode on my breast went on for probably fifteen or twenty minutes. The current would increase in voltage to the point of producing muscular convulsions, and I would just be thrown to the floor. And then he would turn the current off, and if I didn't get up rapidly enough, even with my hands handcuffed behind my back on the wet floor with no clothes on, he would turn on the current with light doses, like a cattle prod. As soon as I would get on my

of that, they stopped, because they don't want you to get to that position: you aren't hurting enough.

So they took me back to my cell and took the handcuffs off from behind my back and put them through a bar in the door, and fastened them at eye level, so that I was forced to remain in a standing position. Then they left me in the cell for about ten or fifteen minutes.

And then back to it again. This we were to do all day long. They would torture me until I would get in that blurred state of mind, and then take me back until I got myself back together, and then back for more.

Almost all the interrogation was aimed at Dom Helder and *Time* magazine. They were trying to get me to say that I was a communist, that Alanir was a communist, and that Dom Helder was cooperating with the Communist Party.

I think they were hopeful that if they tortured me for two or three days I would confess to being a communist, and then they could tell the State Department that I was a confessed communist and in that case the Department probably wouldn't give them any static.

By Wednesday I wasn't being tortured to the same degree. I found out later that the US Consul had now begun to put the heat on to get me released. The next day I was taken to see him, I don't suppose I was ever as glad to see another human being in my life. The torture was all pretty small potatoes after those first four days. Finally, after a couple more weeks they took me out to my house, had me pack a suitcase and put me on a plane to New York.

One purpose of this torture is information gathering. Brazil successfully wiped out a rash of urban guerillas in 1969 by use of torture. They would get people they suspected of being involved in a subversive group and torture them for the names of all their friends. Then they would bring in all of their friends and ask for more names.

Out of 500 people tortured, they probably found three or four legitimate subversives. That's a massive overkill, but it does work in that kind of situation.

But the main purpose of torture in a society like that is social repression and inhibition. Torture just isn't very effective as a means of getting information, because once people break under torture, a lot of what they say is just not accurate. The main purpose is social intimidation. And it's extremely effective.

In Brazil, labor unions have been wiped out, wages are controlled by the government, profits are completely free, management does what it wants. It's an investor's paradise (See Diagram II). And they deliberately choose to make the rich richer and the poor poorer in order to increase investment capital (See Diagram I). Now when you have a government like that, over the last ten years the poor people, the bottom 60% of Brazil, are worse off now than they were ten years ago. When you have that kind of skewing of income, with a government that is unpopular, that came into power by force and not by anyone's choice, it requires repression to stay in power. It requires the appearance of



An anonymous victim of torture.

had a chance to answer. I was subjected to about twenty minutes of this kind of questioning, which was designed to disorientate and thoroughly intimidate me. I was kicked in the groin three times in succession, until I was laid out altogether, and then I was forced to get up again for more questions and beatings.

Then all of a sudden there was this complete silence and everybody left except for one guy. I heard him filling a bucket with water which he poured on my legs and on the floor around me. Then he came back with electrodes, fastening one to the second toe of my right foot and the other fastened with a spring clip to the nipple of my right breast, cutting right into the flesh. I knew what I was in for because electric shock is their standard torture technique. He went back and sat down at what must have been a table and began asking the same questions — only this time, with each question would come an electric shock.

The questions themselves weren't

feet again, it would be the same thing; more questions, turning on the shock, increasing the voltage until I would be thrown to the floor again.

After about fifteen or twenty minutes of that, he came and took it off my nipple and put it on my penis. Not only is that extremely painful, but it triggers a nerve reaction in the legs. I was in a standing position, and when the current would get to a certain point, my legs would just simply fly up in front of me, contracting at the hips, and I would fall on my back from this height to the floor.

I think the whole first session was about an hour and a half, counting the beatings and the shocks. By that time I was really just sort of in limbo, which is I think a physiological and psychological defense mechanism. You get to the point where it is not real. YOU are really not even there any more; you are just kind of hanging on. It was all sort of a big blur. And when they became aware