

REFUGEE ACCUSED OF KILLING INMATE IN VIETNAM CAMP U.S. INVESTIGATING INCIDENT FROM 1979

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A Vietnamese refugee is under federal investigation amid allegations that he killed a fellow inmate while serving as a trusty at a communist "re-education camp."

The investigation, by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, is the first of its kind involving alleged atrocities in the postwar camps.

Thi Dinh Bui, 60, of Orange Grove, is a former South Vietnamese army captain who spent 1975 to 1981 in the Thanh Cam camp near Hanoi after the end of the Vietnam War.

Another refugee, the Rev. Andrew Nguyen Huu Le, contends that Bui kicked him unconscious. The Roman Catholic priest also said in a signed affidavit to immigration officials that he saw Bui kill a man, a charge disputed by Bui as well as a former army nurse who now lives in San Jose.

Some want Bui deported if the allegations are upheld, but his fate would be unclear because the United States has no extradition treaty with Vietnam.

Bui, a father of nine, came to the United States in 1994 and now delivers newspapers as an independent contractor for the Orange County Register. He admits that he struck inmates but denied severely beating or killing anyone.

"The people I work with, how can I look at them in the face if I did? They know that I am a good man."

Vincent An Van Mai, an ex-inmate at the camp who now lives in San Jose, said camp guards -- not Bui -- were responsible for the death.

"I am not protecting Bui Dinh Thi," Mai said. "He is a man with both bad and good traits."

Mai said Rev. Le, who travels the world as head of the Washington-based International Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam, is pursuing Bui to raise his stature.

"I'm sure the real story is politics," Mai said.

"Before this, people didn't know Father Le. But now Vietnamese all over this country, they know him well."

The priest contends that in 1979 he and four cellmates chipped a hole in the wall and fled camp, but were caught the next morning. Bui kicked him until he passed out, he said in the INS affidavit.

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"Bui dragged me by my legs up the stairs to the solitary confinement room, banging my head against the steps," the priest wrote. "He threw me into a room and left me there; he thought I was dead. He then proceeded to beat Maj. Tiep Van Dang to death. I personally witnessed this brutal murder."

Bui denies he hit anyone that day, saying he only picked up the men that the camp guards had beaten.

Nine other former inmates told the Orange County Register that they saw Bui beat prisoners but not kill anyone.

In 1996, Rev. Le wrote a memoir of his life in the camp that made the accusations against Bui. The memoir was sent to the priest's friends and was circulated to refugee activists as e-mail.

Last year, activist Thang Dinh Nguyen of Washington filed a complaint demanding Bui's deportation on the grounds that he committed crimes against humanity.

The sister of the man Bui allegedly killed also wants him deported.

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