

Torture, horror recalled by 2 ex-political prisoners

By Scott Shane

For Veronica DeNegri, a municipal transit official in Chile, the knock at the door came one day in 1975 as she sat in her Valparaiso apartment with her two sons, ages 8 years and 18 months.

Two men without uniforms hauled her away. For 5½ months, out of touch with her children and other relatives, she endured gruesome physical torture at the hands of Chile's military government.

Kassie Neou, a Cambodian English teacher forced into farm labor after the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975, was betrayed to prison, interrogations and beatings when he spoke a few English words within earshot of a guard. Accused of being a CIA agent, he survived by craft and luck.

The two former prisoners, one a victim of a right-wing government, the other of a left-wing regime, yesterday brought the grim reality of political repression to a benefit for Amnesty International USA on the Johns Hopkins University campus.

Their descriptions of brutality, degradation, starvation and death seemed worlds away from the quiet elegance of Hopkins's Glass Pavilion, where about 100 people sipped wine and nibbled on cheese while a duo played classical music.



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Kassie Neou (left) and Veronica DeNegri relate their respective experiences as political prisoners in Cambodia and Chile.

But Mr. Neou and Mrs. DeNegri told the audience at the \$15-a-person affair that Amnesty's pressure for release of prisoners of conscience can sway governments and save lives. The Baltimore chapter, started

in 1977, has about 200 supporters and 40 active members who have lobbied for the release of prisoners in a dozen countries.

While the Soviets have denounced the group as "anti-socialist," the

Guatemalan government attacks it as part of "the international Communist conspiracy" and Iran says it's an "agent of Satan." Such wide-directional abuse is proof of Amnesty's effectiveness, said Joshua Rubenstein, director of the group's North-east region.

Twenty-four years after Amnesty's creation, Mr. Rubenstein admitted, it's hard to argue that the group is on its way to eradicating repression in the world.

"But maybe it's going to hell a little slower," he said. He paraphrased the French philosopher Albert Camus: "We can't create a world where children aren't tortured. But perhaps we can create a world where fewer children are tortured."

The two former prisoners appeared to agree. Both are now 40, and though their spouses disappeared in the political turmoil in their respective countries, they now live with their children in the Washington area.

Mrs. DeNegri, who had been a union activist in Chile, was bound and blindfolded during torture sessions and never saw the faces of her tormentors. She said she was raped, beaten, given electric shocks, pushed down stairs and nearly drowned in a dunking tank.

See **AMNESTY**, 12D, Col. 1