

'Abhorrent to Conscience'

Restatement yesterday from the White House deploring the alleged massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American troops as "abhorrent to the conscience of the American people" expressed feelings universally shared throughout the United States. It would be even more appropriate, in view of the sickening evidence that has been brought forward by eye-witnesses and the profound impact and implications of these disclosures at home and abroad, for President Nixon personally to express his concern as Chief of State and Commander in Chief of the armed forces.

More important than public statements, however, will be the diligence with which the Government pursues its investigations not only into the events of March 16, 1968 at Songmy but into the circumstances which kept the facts hidden for so long. Americans must beware of prejudging individual guilt, but enough is known already to require a complete public accounting and prosecution of those responsible—at all levels of authority.

It should not be forgotten that, unforgivable as it is, the apparent face-to-face shooting of civilians in a village street by American foot-soldiers took place in the context of widespread slaughter of equally innocent civilians from a distance by air and artillery. Every war is terrible; and certainly the Second World War had more than its share of wholesale civilian destruction. But even more than most other modern wars, the Vietnam war has been particularly hard on civilians because of its essentially civil nature. At the time of the Songmy incident, civilian casualties from all causes were running at the rate of 9,600 a month, according to official South Vietnamese sources.

Granting that the innocent suffer in all wars and that the Vietnamese on both sides have shown far less concern for human life than have United States forces, this country still needs to ask itself whether the ends it seeks in Vietnam justify the terrible cost in human suffering. And if the investigation into Songmy bears out the present indications that an unconscionable atrocity has indeed taken place, it will only reinforce the deep-seated doubts of millions of Americans today that the stated goals of this war can ever be achieved when Americans can be reduced to such bestiality and American power results in indiscriminate destruction of the communities of the very people in South Vietnam whom we are trying to protect.

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