

No POWs Alive, House

Washington

No American prisoners of war are being held alive in Indochina and only a partial accounting of the 2546 Americans missing in action will ever be made, a House committee has concluded in a report to be released today.

With two dissents, the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia recommends that the U.S. government declare as officially dead the Americans who did not return from the war in Southeast Asia. The report says that current law adequately protects the rights of the missing persons and their next of kin.

A moratorium on changing a person's status from "missing" to "dead" has been in effect at the Defense and State Departments while the committee conducted its investigation.

The committee also recommends that U.S. diplomats, in negotiating with the Vietnamese government for more information on missing Americans, "should consider the possibility of (offering) humanitarian aid but not war reparations."

A copy of the report, which contains both praise and criticism of Ford administration efforts on the sensitive MIA-POW issue, was obtained by the Los Angeles Times yesterday.

Advance word of the committee's findings has already elicited a

strong protest from the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

Carol Bates, the league's executive director, charged in a letter to the committee last week that the panel's 15-month investigation was inadequate and that its rumored recommendations, which she said the committee had no authority to make, would kill the impetus for a far broader probe.

She also noted in an interview yesterday that there is concern that

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changing a person's official status from missing to dead would have significant financial ramifications for the family. Such families would be given death benefits in place of the active duty military pay they now receive.

She added, however, that the league has been told by a White House official that no action on status changes will be taken during the remaining weeks of the Ford administration.

The House committee, headed by G. V. Montgomery (Dem-Miss.),

gives several reasons for concluding that there are no American prisoners of war still alive in Indochina:

- "A substantial number of still-active MIA and POW cases contain an evidentiary basis for determining death."

- Factors such as the way the person was lost, enemy practices and the long passage of time "constitute strong circumstantial evidence that many missing Americans failed to survive ..."

- "In no case after World War

II or the Korean War did a serviceman return alive who had been MIA and later presumed dead in accordance with the Missing Persons Act."

- Repeated statements since 1973 by Indochinese officials that no Americans are held as POWs "militate against any returning alive from captivity."

- "The average time these Americans have been missing is nine years."

The government's various intelligence agencies also have concluded that there are no living POWs, the report says.

Unreliable foreign sources, primarily in Indochina, fabricated numerous false sighting reports and rumors of captive Americans, confusing the families of victims and nourishing false hopes and suspicions, the committee says.

Of the 2546 Americans involved, 41 were civilians — 25 missing or unaccounted for and 16 unrecovered dead or presumed

POWs who have not been accounted for by their captors, six were improperly classified as POWs at the time of their loss and there is no evidence that the other 16 were actually taken prisoner.

At least one deserter and one defector were alive in Indochina in the early 1970s and may still be alive, the report says.

dead.

The other 2505 were servicemen — 1113 killed in action whose bodies have not been recovered, 631 who have been presumed dead, 728 still listed as missing and 33 still listed as prisoners of war.

Of the 33 still listed as prisoners, the committee says, at least 11 were actually suspected to be

Also, a small number of other deserters and civilians may still live in South Vietnam.

“A total accounting for all 2546 Americans who did not return from Southeast Asia is not now, and never will be, possible,” the committee says.

Los Angeles Times
