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Priest Refutes

McCloskey

WASHINGTON — (UPI) — A Roman Catholic priest who interpreted for Rep. Paul N. McCloskey in Laos took issue today with the California Republican's charges that the United States had "pursued a program of deliberately destroying Laotian villages."

The Rev. Matt Menger, director of Catholic Relief Services in Laos, said McCloskey's charges were not true. He also asserted that McCloskey was mistaken in assuming that American bombing was responsible for a large proportion of the 300,000 refugees in Laos.

15 Years

Father Menger, pastor of the Immaculate Church in Vientiane, has been in Laos for 15 years.

An interview with him was arranged by administration officials who suggested that he talk to a UPI newsman.

McCloskey has said he may run against President Nixon in Republican presidential primaries next year to spotlight the necessity to end the war.

The priest declined to say who paid his fare from Laos to Washington.

State Department officials said Menger was "invited" to come to Washington to discuss refugee and other problems because of his knowledge of Laos. They said they assumed the U.S. government paid for his ticket inasmuch as this was the custom when the government asked for someone to come for conferences.

Short Time

The priest said McCloskey spent only a few hours one morning during a recent brief visit in Laos, talking with "seven or eight refugees" at the village of Ban Na Nga about 20 miles north of the capital city of Vientiane.

Father Menger said he and a Canadian Protestant churchman, who had spent 42 years in Laos, suggested to McCloskey that they go farther north into the heart of the refugee camps to get a more representative assessment of the views of those

Laotians who had been displaced in recent years.

McCloskey refused, Menger said, contenting himself with talking with representatives from seven villages at the edge of the Plain of Jars who had been in the middle of the battle when Laotian

government forces drove the Communist Pathet Lao out of the area in 1969.

"It is possible," Menger said, "that some of those villages in the Plain of Jars were destroyed by bombing but also very possible that they were destroyed more by

Communist artillery shelling."

He said the group of people represented by the seven or eight villagers McCloskey talked to represented "a very small percentage of the overall 300,000 refugees in Laos."