

Saigon Officials Slow to Investigate Massacre Charges

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 20—Only one high South Vietnamese official is known to have commented so far on the mass killings last year in which two United States soldiers are facing possible charges of multiple murder. No news of the case has reached the South Vietnamese public, and newspaper editors here are reliably reported to have been ordered to withhold articles on it.

Informed sources reported today that the highest levels of the South Vietnamese Government, including President Nguyen Van Thieu and Defense Minister Nguyen Van Vy, appeared to have been unaware of the reported massacre of hundreds of civilians by American troops until accounts appeared last week in the American press.

A high aide in the Defense Ministry, through which the top local officials, all military men, must report, said that the ministry had received no report of the alleged killings of unarmed men, women and children at Songmy, near Danang, until "a few days ago."

'Unavoidable Things Happen'

Commenting on the killings, which according to survivors may have taken as many as 567 lives, House Speaker Nguyen Ba Luong said: "Unavoidable things happen in a war."

According to reliable sources, Captain Tran Ngoc Tan, the district chief at the time of

the Songmy incident March 16, 1968—was informed of it within a day and passed the information on to the province chief, Col. Thon That Khien, after about a week of investigation.

Captain Tan was reported to have written letters to Colonel Khien and the chief of staff of the South Vietnamese Second Division condemning the action of the American soldiers. For reasons still unexplained, a list of 450 to 500 suspected victims, compiled by the village chief, who was not present at the incident, appears never to have reached the province chief.

Colonel Khien said he reported the case to the next echelon, the commanding general of the Second Division. It could not be learned whether Colonel Khien made his report only after completion of his investigation, about three months after the event.

Chief Delayed Inquiry

The province chief, who said he delayed a thorough investigation because of his original doubts and reluctance to help enemy propaganda, was later hampered because of Vietcong strength in the area of the suspected crime, about six miles northeast of his provincial capital of Quangngai, which prevented him from investigating on the spot.

Nothing is known on the progress of the report beyond the division level. Normal procedure prescribes that it pass

to the corps commander, a deputy to the Joint General Staff, the chief of the Joint General Staff, the Defense Minister, the Premier and the President.

The earliest known contact between American and Vietnamese officials on the case occurred last March, when American Army investigators interrogated Vietnamese aides.

President Thieu's reaction to the disclosure of the suspected mass murder, according to sources close to him, was an oral order to Maj. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of I corps, whose territory includes Quangngai Province, to investigate and report to him.

No Panel for Case

The sources said that so far no special investigating panel has been assigned to the case.

According to sources close to the Thieu Government, the press silence is the result of a determination to give no propaganda assistance to the enemy. Those less favorably inclined to the Government suggested that this attitude is due, at least in part, to the determination of the Government to remain closely tied to the United States.

The Defense Ministry is reported to be preparing a factual statement on the case, but General Vy, the Defense Minister, has not yet signed a draft submitted to him. In the meantime, he has instructed his staff to keep him apprised of

all newspaper and news agency reports.

South Vietnamese officials explained that the principal cause of the 20-month lag in information has been a reluctance at all levels of the military hierarchy to place full credence in the original atrocity report. All levels of government are headed by the military chiefs whose areas of command coincide with the various levels of administration.

This reluctance is said to have prompted officials to attempt to disprove or deride the charges rather than gather evidence that might support them.

This tendency is said to be strengthened by the fact that the Vietcong make use of the atrocity allegations in propaganda and South Vietnamese officials over the years of war have formed the habit of rejecting such allegations out of hand.

The apparent lack of urgency in investigating the most serious atrocity charge laid against the United States force here corresponds, in the view of South Vietnamese and foreign analysts, to a fatalistic attitude toward great loss of life, an attitude born of the war. The observers explain it, regretfully, by a diminished capacity for moral outrage on the part of a population that has endured a quarter-century of fighting in which neither side has made much distinction between combatants and civilians.