

Legislators, at Songmy, Unable to See Survivors

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SONGMY, South Vietnam, Dec. 1—A group of senators and representatives from the South Vietnamese National Assembly came to the refugee camp here today to interrogate survivors of the alleged massacre nearby. They found none.

The eight legislators expressed the belief that the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu was determined to do all it could to prevent testimony that would contradict the official declaration that no massacre had occurred.

Enemy forces said to be in the area and artillery fire in support of allied troops prevented the investigators from reaching the ruined settlement of Mylai No. 4 and what are presumed to be the burial places of victims of the alleged massacre.

Many villagers have given substantially identical accounts of the events of March 16, 1968, since the first newsmen visited the camp Nov. 16. The witnesses seemed to have disappeared from public view in recent days, however, and none came forward today.

Saigon's Account Echoed

The investigators from Saigon met only provincial officials, who adhered to the Government account that the victims of an American infantry company's sweep through the village were about 120 Vietcong and about 20 civilians killed as the inevitable result of aerial bombardment. Accounts of the massacre have put the death toll as high as 567.

Because of the day's experience, the legislators decided to seek approaches independent of Government channels while continuing to pursue information by the official route.

Senator Tran Van Don, chairman of the Senate Defense Committee, said he planned to return tomorrow from the provincial capital of Quangnai, but without the long convoy of jeeps bearing Government officials and newsmen that tracked into the village this afternoon.

The Senator, an opponent of President Thieu, said the villagers seemed especially intimidated by the presence of the province chief, Col. Ton That Khien.

The group from the House of Representatives, consisting of the chairman of the Defense Committee and four of the five deputies from Quangnai Province, planned to conduct its inquiry principally through local political officials familiar with the province and unintimidated by the Government.

Higher Status Sought

A Deputy, Nguyen Bien, said the Quangnai deputies would also propose to the Defense Committee's chairman, Nguyen Van An, that the inquiry, which is not a formal investigation, be raised to such status. That would give the deputies more power to require Government cooperation and their findings greater weight.

As the investigators, heavily protected by South Vietnamese troops and armor, walked through rice paddies from the dirt trail on which they had driven from Quangnai to the site of Mylai No. 4, they were warned by shots from United States Marines in an observation post atop a knoll that enemy forces were near and that artillery support had been called in.

As the barrage began to strike a mile away, the legislators withdrew, failing to see the ruined houses and the grass-covered mounds under which the victims are assumed to be buried.

The visitors showed greater concern than the peasant children and cattle of this heavily contested region as the shells whistled in, shook the earth

and raised smoke not far away.

At a new hamlet where 1900 villagers from a number of nearby hamlets have been resettled and fenced in to deny them to the Vietcong, the legislators were greeted by copies by a South Vietnamese-United States psychological-warfare poster depicting Vietcong atrocities in Quangnai. Distributed yesterday by American and local officials, they were posted on the sides of the one-room shacks.

The investigators met a number of women who had lost relatives, but not in Songmy. One woman said she fled through the devastated hamlet on the day of its destruction and saw many bodies, including those of women and children, lying in the road.

Shown a recent copy of Time magazine containing pictures of the dead of Songmy, she said she had seen such piles along the way. She said there was no bombing on that day.

The province Governor, in the presence of the press, gave the senators and deputies a long briefing on the event that upheld the Government declaration in all respects—a departure from the position he took in an interview Nov. 16, when he conceded that he believed a massacre had taken place.

The other local official who appeared, Capt. Tran Ngoc Tan, district chief at Songmy at the time of the killings, also departed from the account he had presented in an interview. He repeated the Government's version in reply to questions by Senator Don.

Toll Put at 450 to 500

In the interview he said his investigation immediately after the event led him to conclude that 450 to 500 people had been killed by the American troops and that he had sent a critical report on the American action to the province chief and the South Vietnamese Second Division, in whose territory Quangnai Province is situated.

Colonel Khien explained the scarcity of information by declaring that at the time of the action Songmy and the satellite hamlets, each known as Mylai were in a Vietcong-dominated zone in which the American division had the right to conduct operations without clearance from the South Vietnamese authorities and without reporting on results.

Songmy was cleared momentarily by Company C of the First Battalion, 20th Infantry, and reoccupied by the Vietcong immediately afterward. Twenty-six members of the company are under investigation and a platoon leader, First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., will be court-martialed on charges involving 109 murders.

The investigating legislators, like the South Vietnamese public, are largely unfamiliar with the many accounts by former members of the company that have appeared in the world press and they often turn to newsmen for information to guide them in their questioning.

The representatives from Quangnai said they had not learned of the alleged massacre, which occurred six miles from here, until after an article appeared in the American press two weeks ago and was rebroadcast by the Vietnamese service of the British Broadcasting Corporation.