

Saigon Senators Go to Songmy and Hear Survivors' Accounts



Senators Tran Van Don, right, and Nguyen Van Chuan in Songmy yesterday questioning a woman who said she survived alleged massacre. Others were newsmen and officials.

United Press International

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Special to The New York Times

SONGMY, South Vietnam,

Dec. 2 — Riding on Army tanks, three South Vietnamese Senators visited today the site of the alleged massacre of a village by American soldiers. They were accompanied by survivors.

The Senate investigators, attended by a host of officials and newsmen, clung to the top and sides of three M-41 medium tanks and then tripped over the rutted green plain, where a village had stood. Some of the mounds over which they stumbled were graves.

They listened while a survivor, Nguyen Then, wearing gray pajamas and a small fedora, pointed to a spot in the canal where he said he had counted 30 bodies, mostly of women and children. Their eyes followed Vo Cha's outstretched arm as he showed the rice paddy where he said he had lain and watched the village die.

One Senator Sure

They asked Do Thi Phu about where her house had stood and where she had buried her husband and 19-year-old brother. And the Senators declared that what happened at Songmy on March 16, 1968, was not a normal act of war, as the South Vietnamese Government had said in a communiqué.

Senator Nguyen Van Chuan said it was clear that there had been a massacre, although the motives and number of victims remained in doubt. Senator Tran Van Don, chairman of the Senate Defense Committee, said that he was convinced that the witnesses to whom he spoke had conveyed the ring of authenticity. Both Senators are former generals.

Assisted by his political associates in Quangnai Province, Senator Don was brought in contact with former residents of the village who gave their version of the events.

The Senator was most impressed by the account of Mr. Cha, a 39-year-old mason. Mr. Cha impressed the Senator particularly because he appeared to be the first witness, here or in America, to praise the actions of some American soldiers in the situation.

Mr. Cha said that a number of American soldiers had not taken part in the killings but had advised the villagers to lie

face down and keep still. This saved their lives, Mr. Cha reported.

This was Mr. Cha's account: He awoke early to see a reconnaissance plane circle over his settlement, Mykhe. Since he knew from experience that this would be followed by artillery fire, he left for the nearby settlement of Tucung, two miles away.

As he neared Tucung, he saw helicopters setting down near the village. American helicopters were fired on from Tucung, presumably by Vietcong guerrillas. As the Americans leaped from the helicopters, Mr. Cha dropped to the ground and observed the action from a distance of 100 yards.

Men ran from the hamlet as the troops approached, Mr. Cha said. Those remaining left their houses and clustered together in open places. He said that the villagers in this region had adopted this habit whenever American troops swept through their hamlets.

The reason is, he said, that Americans are suspicious of those who remain inside, believing them to be hiding from them. In the past, he said, American troops were friendly with the women and children who gathered in the open and gave them cigarettes and candy.

But Mr. Cha said that the Americans this time appeared angry. He heard many shots ring out and kept his head

down. He heard cries and moans. When the firing stopped he saw houses burn and he watched the Americans search the trenches, tunnels and other shelters of each house, often throwing grenades inside.

The Americans left the ruins of the hamlet early in the afternoon, Mr. Cha went on, having arrived about 7 A.M. He saw many bodies, and in the marshy canal between the village and the rice paddies the water had turned red. He did not count the bodies, and avoided the part of the hamlet where most of them seemed to be. He estimated the number of dead in

of the hamlet where most of them seemed to be. He estimated the number of dead in Tucung at 100.

Mr. Cha said he saw mainly bodies of old men, women and children and assumed most of the men of fighting age had run away, either because they were Vietcong or because they feared the Americans would treat them as Vietcong.

Mr. Cha said he buried three children, a woman and a man aged about 40. Then he returned to Mykhe, which was spared that day. Mykhe was razed in a later operation.

He said other villagers told him that 227 people had been killed in the hamlets of Songmy but he had not verified the figure. Equally unverified estimates by other villagers have run as high as 567.

Mr. Cha and other witnesses said there had been no bombing or shelling of the village before the attack, although the Saigon Government declared that the casualties had been caused by such action and not by

that the casualties had been caused by such action and not by small-arms fire from the ground. The Senators noted that the site of the village showed such holes might have been covered over in 20 months.

Mr. Then told the Senators that he had run away from the village when the Americans landed and that when he came back he had to step over bodies lying everywhere. Asked how many he had seen, the 53-year-old peasant said: "Too many to count."

The dead included his wife, his 3-year-old child and 10-year-old grandchild and his daughter-in-law, he said.

A 10-year-old daughter and an 8-year-old granddaughter told him how the members of his family were killed, he said.