

Three Saigon Senators Report Signs Civilians Were Slain at Close Range

Special to The New York Times

DANANG, South Vietnam, Dec. 3—The members of the South Vietnamese Senate's fact-finding group said in an interview today that three days of investigation near the scene of the alleged massacre of civilians by American troops at Songmy had led them to believe that many civilians were killed by small-arms fire at close range.

While accepting it as a preliminary conclusion that no combatants had been needlessly killed in a sweep of Vietcong territory on March 16, 1968, the three Senators said that the motives for the killings, individual degrees of guilt and the number of victims remained unclear.

The chairman, Senator Tran Van Don, said the event raised a number of basic issues for re-examination—"from American policy in Vietnam to the manner of conducting the war, peace, the American presence in Vietnam and the present Vietnamese Government."

Report to Be Delayed

The former general, who heads the Senate Defense Committee, said his group would prepare a report on its meetings with about 10 survivors and with provincial officials. An official report will be held up, he added, pending the outcome of the court-martial of First Lieut. William J. Calley Jr. of Miami, who has been charged by the Army with 109 murders at Songmy. No trial date has been set.

Senator Don, who is a former Defense Minister and chief of staff, strongly condemned the concept of "free-fire zones," in which, he said, American troops have the right to mount operations using artillery and air strikes even on populated targets without South Vietnamese permission.

Although there have been improvements, he added, the practice continues.

Similarly, he condemned what he termed the continuing practice of allowing Americans to go into action unaccompanied by Vietnamese

liaison officers or at least interpreters, who might deal with civilians and protect them.

All of the criticized conditions prevailed in the "search-and-destroy" operation at Songmy, in which an undisclosed number of men, women and children — varying, depending on the source, from 145 to 567 — were reported killed, the Senator said.

After a meeting with Maj. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the I Corps area, the Central Vietnam region in which Songmy is situated, Mr. Don said that it was clear that even in an action that had cost so many civilian lives, the South Vietnamese authorities had no real idea of how many were killed because the Americans were not obliged to report to them.

"The population floats between the Communists and the Government, which does not protect them," the Senator said.

Describing the meeting with General Lam, the highest Vietnamese official informed of the Songmy incident before it became a world issue, another Senator said: "He knows nothing about it, but the Government communiqué is based on his report."

Reports Termed Pro Forma

The Senators indicated that they believed that no South Vietnamese authority has seriously dealt with the case and that the reports of the district chief, the province chief and the corps commander, as well as the communiqué, were nothing more than pro forma documents to dispose of a disagreeable issue.

Senator Don also deplored the lack of information provided by the Government, which he said made him dependent largely on foreign sources.

While affirming that the atrocity charges were directed against individuals and could not be construed as an indictment of the United States, Mr. Don asserted that the war was "systematically killing the population."

He said it was generally ac-

cepted that the South Korean troops in Vietnam had done worse than any others.

The three Senators had assumed that the unit involved at Songmy had been driven to excess by particularly heavy casualties just before. The Americal Division, the unit that carried out the operation, reported the number of dead for the outfit, the largest in the Army with nearly 25,000 men, as 18 for the preceding week and three for the three days prior to the action.

Senator Don ridiculed assertions by the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu that the war was going well and that 93 per cent of the population of 16 million was under Government control. The optimistic figures are produced, according to Mr. Don, because Mr. Thieu sets pacification goals that district and province chiefs than say they have achieved.

Charge Termed Rubbish

SONGMY, South Vietnam, Dec. 3 (UPI)—An Australian officer said today that women in this area "knew how to cut throats" and that children "could strip down a weapon like professionals."

Capt. John Nelson, a Special Forces adviser to South Vietnamese troops who has been in Vietnam for 18 months, said he thought reports of an American massacre were rubbish.

"That place was in enemy territory," he said. "The women moved around at night and they knew how to cut throats and the children could strip down a weapon like professionals."

Kennedy Charge Studied

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 3 — United States and South Vietnamese Government spokesmen said today that they were looking in to Senator Edward M. Kennedy's recent assertion that 300,000 South Vietnamese civilians had been killed in the war, mostly by American and South Vietnamese troops.

Dr. William Oldham, deputy director of the public health division of the United States aid mission here, said in a telephone interview that there was a curate way of determining how many civilians had been killed and by whom.

"Anyone who says that is speculating," he commented.

The only available statistics on civilian casualties, Dr. Oldham said, cover South Vietnamese reporting to Government hospitals for treatment of war injuries. From 1967 to the end of October, 1969, he said, 198,338 civilians sought such aid. Of that number 41,686 were children under 13 years of age and 67,253 were women.

Dr. Oldham said that an effort to categorize the source of the wounds was abandoned some years ago because of bookkeeping problems.