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RIVERS PICKS FOUR TO STUDY SONGMY

He Orders Inquiry 'in Depth'
as He Ends Hearings

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 — In an abrupt change of tactics, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee ended today a subcommittee's hearings on the alleged massacre of Vietnamese civilians in Songmy and appointed four members to "go into this matter in depth."

The chairman, L. Mendel Rivers, Democrat of South Carolina, named one of his closest Congressional allies, Representative F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana, a ranking committee Democrat, to head the exclusive panel.

Mr. Rivers, a frequent defender of the military, whose week-old closed hearings have brought rumors of an attempted "whitewash," said Mr. Hébert would have a "blank check" to look into the Songmy incident.

"And you know," Mr. Rivers told reporters, "Mr. Hébert is not in the business of not calling a spade a spade."

Asked when hearings would resume, Mr. Rivers said: "I just don't know. There could be numbers and numbers of witnesses. That is the reason it has to be done by a smaller committee."

Mr. Hébert said that "there are likely to be hundreds of witnesses," although many would present evidence to staff members without the necessity of testifying.

Referring to the hearings conducted by his 13-member investigative subcommittee, the chairman repeated his feeling that "at this point in our record, there is no evidence sufficient to convict anybody of any massacres."

Seeks Study 'In Depth'

However, he added, sufficient evidence and testimony have been introduced "that we can now see that it is now necessary that the subcommittee go into this matter in depth."

Among the witnesses that the committee has heard are Capt. Ernest L. Medina, the commander of the company that swept the village of Songmy on March 16, 1968, and Chief Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson Jr., a helicopter pilot who has been decorated for saving Vietnamese lives in the village that day.

After hearing the pilot's testimony, Mr. Rivers said Wednesday that it did not indicate that a massacre had taken place.

Later, however, published reports challenged Mr. Rivers's version of the testimony. Quoting an unidentified committee member, a report in The Washington Evening Star said that the pilot had testified that he ordered the helicopter guns to be trained on American soldiers in Songmy while he evacuated civilians threatened by the Americans.

Yesterday, Mr. Rivers branded the anonymous source a "damned liar" and said his own version of the testimony was accurate.

'A Fair Day in Court'

The chairman denied that his purpose in naming the new panel was to tighten his control over the release of testimony and stop "leaks" to the press.

"It is going to be mighty hard for anybody to get a fair day in court," Mr. Rivers said in reference to news accounts of the alleged atrocities, "and this is another reason the special subcommittee is set up."