

'Regrettable'

Saigon's Senate Calls My Lai An Isolated Act

Saigon

The South Vietnamese Senate adopted a resolution last night describing the alleged massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai as "an isolated act by an American unit and not the policy of the United States armed forces."

The Senators did not label the incident as a massacre or even a killing, despite the report of an investigation by the Senate Defense Committee which determined that at least 47 men, women and children had been slain at My Lai on March 16, 1968.

Nor did they assign ultimate responsibility for the incident to President Nguyen Van Thieu, as proposed by Senator Tran Van Don, a member of the opposition who is chairman of the Defense Committee.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Instead, the senators called on the government to provide better security for civilians living in insecure areas and to improve coordination between the South Vietnamese and American military commands so that such an incident would not occur again.

The compromise resolution was seen as a victory for President Thieu over Senator Don, who is generally regarded as Thieu's chief political rival in the National Assembly.

At My Lai, the resolution said, a "regrettable incident happened, causing fatalities and damaging the properties of civilians."

CHARGE

In a speech accompanying the submission of his committee's 40-page report, Senator Don charged that the South Vietnamese government had failed to protect the civilians of My Lai adequately and that as a result, "the president must bear full responsibility for the incident before history and the people."

Don also asserted that the government had failed to evacuate the civilians from the "free fire" area that surrounded My Lai at the time, and had failed to provide sufficient security for their lives and property.

"The executive branch hid the truth and considered the case as closed," he said. "By so doing it demanded the people and the armed forces."

STATEMENT

This was a reference to a government statement on November 22 declaring that press reports of a massacre were "totally false," and dismissing the civilian deaths in the village as "normal and unavoidable acts of war."

Despite protests from a number of legislators and criticism from Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, Thieu has stuck to this initial finding and declined to reopen the government investigation of the incident.

A few days after the South Vietnamese government statement was issued, the United States Army announced it would prosecute First Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr. on a charge of murdering 109 civilians at My Lai.

In the Senate debate a number of senators made it clear that they considered Don's allegations more of an effort to embarrass Thieu than to shed light on the incident.

Most seemed to agree, however, with Don's thesis that South Vietnam exercises too little control over military operations in the country.

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