

Human Error Seen As Probable Cause In Air Raid Mistake

By Michael Getler
Washington Post Staff Writer

A B-52 bombing accident that left an estimated 137 people dead and more than 260 wounded in the Cambodian village of Neak Luong on Aug. 5 was probably caused by human error rather than mechanical failure, according to Pentagon sources.

An Air Force investigation into the tragedy is still under way and no official determination has been made yet as to precisely what went wrong or whether negligence charges will be filed against any of the bomber's six-man crew.

But preliminary indications are said to point toward a failure by some crewman to actuate a critical part of the giant plane's electronic bombing system as the most likely cause of the worst bombing error of the war.

Aside from the tragic dimensions of the accident, which came just 10 days before a congressional ban on bombing went into effect, the Air Force is deeply concerned over the circumstances surrounding it since it could turn up a flaw—albeit a rare one—in the procedures followed aboard B-52s.

Even though the huge eight-engine B-52s have been dropping conventional bombs on Southeast Asia for eight years, these bombers and their crews are all part of the Strategic Air Command whose primary mission is to deliver nuclear bombs if an atomic war ever started.

Thus, selection of B-52 crews and control over all details about how a bombing mission is to be flown is of critical importance to SAC.

While there have been other bombing errors by smaller fighter-bombers and some by B-52s during millions of flights in a nine-year air war—including the bombing of the French mission in Hanoi—Pentagon sources believe the

Neak Luong incident may be unique.

Most of the other errors, at least those that are known about, are generally attributed to such things as mechanical failure in which bombs do not come off their racks as quickly as they are supposed to, or bombs that are dropped too quickly because the bombers themselves come under attack. There have been other instances of poor target information being supplied to airmen and occasionally some poor bombing runs made by pilots.

In the case of the Neak Luong bombing, however, it is suspected—though not yet proven—that one of the plane's officers forgot to actuate the plane's off-set bombing system and that at least one and possibly two other officers aboard failed to catch this omission in running through the checklist prior to the actual bomb run.

Under normal circumstances when the B-52s bombed in South Vietnam the planes released their huge cargo of 66 500-pound bombs under direction of a radar controller on the ground who tracked the planes to their targets and told them when to unload.

But when the planes bombed areas in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the B-52s were generally out of range of these ground radar stations and relied instead on their on-board radars.

In many cases, however, it is not possible to actually "see" the intended target on the plane's radar, so a technique called "off-set" bombing is used. In that technique, the B-52's own radar picks out a known landmark near the target—such as a mountain or a bend in a river—and then drops its bombs a certain number of miles "off-set" from that known landmark where the target is supposed to be.

The landmark itself is used for an initial aiming point, with the "off-set" distance and direction of the target from the aim point set into the plane's computer.

In the Neak Luong incident, sources say it appears that either the off-set never got set into the computer or that the switch to make sure it would be used in the computer's calculations was never thrown. Thus Neak Luong itself, which was the landmark, got hit with most of the bombs.

The village of about 5,000 people is located along the Mekong River about 40 miles southeast of the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

Earlier this week, the Pentagon provided the first indication that the Neak Luong bombing may have involved human error when it reported that "witnesses called before the investigating team have a right to legal counsel and such counsel has been provided where requested."

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Gen. Daniel James said legal protections were normal in such investigations and declined to speculate on what the Air Force might conclude or recommend from its inquiry.