

USIS FEATURE

FOR USE BY NEWSPAPERS, MAGAZINES, OR RADIO STATIONS WITH OR WITHOUT CREDIT TO USIS.

NLF FILE	OPS SUBJ.
DATE 12/67	SUB-CAT.
	
(DAR SON)	
U.S. INFORMATION SERVICE	

12/67

005924

No. 67-SM-156
January 1968
IPS/SM/MJ

THE MASSACRE AT DAK SON

SUMMARY: This article describes one of the worst Communist atrocities ever committed in Vietnam -- the massacre of more than 200 men, women and children at the refugee village of Dak Son in South Vietnam's central highlands.

LENGTH: 1,000 words

PHOTOS: This article may be offered as an illustrated feature by incorporating six IPS photos of the Dak Son massacre (Numbers 67-4445 through 67-4450) distributed separately in mid-December.

NOTE: Please remove this cover page before distributing the attached article.

January 1968

THE MASSACRE AT DAK SON

Until shortly after midnight on December 5, 1967, the hamlet of Dak Son was a busy, peaceful community of thatch-roofed huts in the foothills of South Vietnam's central highlands, separated by 32 miles of thick jungle from the Cambodian border and inhabited by some 2,000 Montagnard tribesmen.

Four hours later it was a scene of death, suffering and ruin.

The Viet Cong had turned the hamlet into a blazing death trap; loosing flame throwers on a primitive people who only recently had learned to use matches.

When they finally departed, taking with them an estimated 200 captives, the communist terrorists left behind the ashes of nearly half of Dak Son's 150 homes and the charred corpses of 252 persons -- most of them women and children -- whose only offense had been to refuse to return to their former homes in the Viet Cong-infested hills of the central highlands.

Dak Son was a South Vietnamese government "new life" hamlet, one of 360 settlements established to temporarily house nearly three-quarters of a million refugees who had fled from areas controlled or contested by the Viet Cong. It long had been a special target for Viet Cong threats and intimidation.

Its 2,000 inhabitants were members of an ethnic minority group, -- the Montagnards -- which has been zealously wooed by the Viet Cong, but which has proven immune to both communist propaganda and Viet Cong coercion through terror.

In the past three years, nearly half of South Vietnam's estimated 800,000 Montagnards have fled the guerrilla strongholds in the highlands and sought government aid and protection in "new life" hamlets.

Deprived of a tractable host population to provide food and laborers, a guerrilla force cannot long survive. Thus, fearing that others of the 20,000 Montagnards still living in Communist-controlled areas of Phuoc Long province might follow the example of Dak Son's refugees, the Viet Cong repeatedly lobbed mortars into the settlement and threatened even more severe consequences if its inhabitants should continue to disregard their demands.

Four earlier nocturnal attacks by the Viet Cong were repulsed by the hamlet's small militia defense force, but the attack of December 5 by between 300 and 600 uniformed guerrillas breached the settlement's barbed wire perimeter.

The attackers were armed with flamethrowers -- 50 to 60 of them -- in addition to rockets, mortars and small arms.

As they stormed through the settlement, shouting threats and curses, long spurts of flame lashed out in all directions, scorching everything in their path. Screaming refugees literally were incinerated in their flimsy huts. Many of the Montagnards sought shelter in the dugouts prepared beneath each hut as protection against the nocturnal

mortar attacks, only to die of asphyxiation as the flames consumed all of the oxygen in the air.

Trees, fences, garden plots, livestock -- even piles of freshly-harvested grain -- were put to the torch. A few huts which somehow escaped the flames were riddled by grenade fragments.

When all of their flamethrower fuel had been consumed, the Viet Cong turned to other weapons. Forcing a group of more than 200 terrified survivors out of their dugouts, the terrorists shot 60 of them on the spot, then marched the rest of them off into captivity.

Dawn revealed indescribable scenes of horror. As stunned and shaken survivors began their search for the bodies of wives, children and friends, they held cabbage leaves and handkerchiefs to their faces in an effort to ward off the smell of burned flesh that permeated the area.

One by one the ruins yielded up the seared, blackened remains of human beings. Charred children clung together in ghastly embrace; infants were found dead in their mothers' arms. The blistered bodies of parents had shielded some children from the flames, but the infants still had perished from suffocation or other causes.

One man lost 13 members of his family, including 12 of his 13 children. Altogether, 252 bodies eventually were recovered, but at least 500 persons had disappeared. Some may have been buried beneath the ashes of Dak Son; at least 200 are known to have been kidnaped by the Viet Cong; many had fled to the hills.

Forty-seven persons -- again mostly women and children -- were treated at a near-by military dispensary, where 33 of them were found to have third-degree burns covering up to 20 percent of their bodies.

In pursuit of their deliberate program of intimidating the South Vietnamese people -- a campaign which already has cost the lives of more than 15,000 South Vietnamese civilians -- the Viet Cong have perpetrated other mass slayings, but the Dak Son massacre marked a new extreme in deliberate terrorism.

This example of the Viet Cong's calculated ruthlessness was followed by world-wide criticism. Dr. Roland Mori, chief of the foreign staff of a Swiss daily newspaper, condemned the "conscious, planned Viet Cong attack." Noting that "70 percent of the victims were women and children," he asked:

"Does the Viet Cong really hope to win the battle for the hearts of the South Vietnamese people by such methods?"

Gabriel Domnech, of Marseilles' La Meridional-La France, was even more pointed in his comments. "The village was called 'New Life.' The population of the hamlet in the highlands had sought refuge there," he wrote.

"These people of primitive ways, living on little, reading no newspaper and listening to no radio; asking nothing more than peace, cared little who won the war so long as they were left alone. But go tell that to the men of Ho Chi Minh!"

Despite the display of brutality and disregard for human life at Dak Son, it was soon apparent that the Viet Cong attempt to terrorize the Montagnards into submission had failed. Even as the survivors gathered the bodies of their friends and relatives and prepared them for burial, tribal leaders announced that the hamlet would be rebuilt.

And although they are unaccustomed to firearms -- they hunt game with crossbow and knife -- more than 100 Montagnard men immediately volunteered for militia training as part of the hamlet's expanded defense force.

(A tabulation of Viet Cong atrocities through November 25 -- some 10 days before the massacre at Dak Son -- showed that Communist terrorists, in 1967 alone, had killed 3,366 South Vietnamese civilians, wounded 6,587 and abducted 4,344. The civilian death total for the war to date had passed 15,000 and the number of persons kidnaped was approaching 50,000.)

* * * * *