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'Phoenix program under House inquiry

By Richard E. Ward

A congressional subcommittee has charged the Pentagon with failure to investigate charges of war crimes carried out under the U.S.-sponsored Phoenix program in South Vietnam.

The criticism of the Pentagon was made in a report by the House of Representatives Foreign Operations and Government Information subcommittee, which noted that many of the so-called "Vietcong" killed under the Phoenix "pacification" program were innocent civilians. The report also expressed reservations about U.S. support for a program that "allegedly included torture, murder and inhumane treatment of South Vietnamese civilians."

The report, not approved for public release by the parent Government Operations Committee, was summarized in an Oct. 3 UPI dispatch. According to the news agency, the Department of Defense refused to investigate the charges when they were brought to the attention of high officials.

Public release of the cautiously worded subcommittee report has apparently been delayed because members of the full committee are less than enthusiastic about confronting the issue of U.S. war crimes. In July 1971 at the time of hearings that constituted the basis for the report, two subcommittee members, Rep. Ogden R. Reid (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Paul McCloskey (R-Calif.) charged outright that the Phoenix program had been responsible for "indiscriminate killings" and the illegal imprisonment of thousands in South Vietnam.

In September of this year, during a hearing before the Senate Refugee subcommittee, a top Defense Department official described the Phoenix program as an intelligence operation. He was challenged by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) in a surprisingly sharp interchange. Kennedy asked how the more than 20,000 "Vietcong" were killed and the witness insisted that the deaths occurred during "military" operations.

'Intelligence operation'?

During the 1971 hearings the House subcommittee heard testimony from William E. Colby who headed the "pacification" effort from mid-1968 to mid-1971. Colby stated that under the Phoenix program 20,587 members of the "Vietcong" infrastructure" were killed from 1968 through May 1971.

Colby, who had been a top CIA official before serving in Saigon on assignment from the White House, insisted that the Phoenix program was "entirely a South Vietnamese operation," although he conceded it had been originated by the CIA.

Colby tried to portray the U.S. role as primarily an "advisory" one, but he also admitted that U.S. personnel participated in the naming of suspects and the capture of prisoners. Admitting "occasional" abuses—the assassination of civilians—had occurred, Colby stated that "we put a stop to this nonsense" in collaboration with the Saigon authorities.

With a facade of candor, Colby's testimony actually was riddled with lies about the Phoenix program, which was initiated under President Johnson and expanded by the Nixon administration. Essentially, the Phoenix program attempted to identify and then assassinate cadres of the National Liberation Front, the political leaders on a local level of the anti-U.S. resistance in South Vietnam.

The program had access to secret CIA funds as well as large appropriations from the U.S. military and economic assistance programs. Assassination teams of mercenaries and U.S. agents who compiled lists of persons to be assassinated were secretly funded.

These aspects of the Phoenix program were revealed in testimony before the same House subcommittee in August 1971 by K. Barton Osborn, who served as an intelligence agent assigned to provide information to the Marines and who also worked for the CIA Phoenix program. Based in Danang, Osborn supervised agent networks for 15 months beginning in 1967.

Osborn contradicted Colby's disclaimers of direct U.S. responsibility for the Phoenix program and made it clear that U.S. personnel participated in murders and tortures. He said U.S. "advisors" were really directing the program.

Osborn also described atrocities he witnessed, including seeing Vietnamese pushed from helicopters, a practice known as "airborne interrogations." He also described how Marine intelligence officers held a Vietnamese woman prisoner in a small cage at their headquarters and starved her to death, refusing to give her either food or water.

These and other examples given by Osborn provide only a small glimpse of the war crimes committed by the U.S. in South Vietnam. The atrocities were an intrinsic part of the Phoenix program directed by the highest U.S. authorities on White House orders. Obviously the Defense Department is not going to investigate these war crimes.

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