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11. LAOS/VIETNAM/MIA'S

JACK ANDERSON (WASHINGTON POST 8/19), FORMER NY REPUBLICAN CONGRESSMAN LE BOUTILLIER (NY TIMES), AND THE WASHINGTON TIMES' ROGERS DISCUSS THE POW-MIA ISSUE.

ANDERSON REFERS TO NUMEROUS "LIVE SIGHTINGS" REPORTS BUT OBSERVES THAT "THE EVIDENCE HAS BEEN INCONCLUSIVE." NEVERTHELESS, HE ADDS, "RECENTLY DECLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS AND OTHER INFORMATION...LEND CREDENCE TO THE BELIEF THAT, AT LEAST IN LAOS, LIVE AMERICAN PRISONERS WERE LEFT BEHIND, AND THAT SOME MAY STILL SURVIVE IN THE GREEN HELL OF SOME JUNGLE PRISON CAMP."

ACCORDING TO ANDERSON, A SERIES OF 6 CIA REPORTS FROM EARLY 1967 TO LATE 1970 ASSERTED THAT US POW'S DEFINITELY WERE BEING HELD IN LAOS. BY OCTOBER 1968, HE ADDS, CIA AGENTS HAD IDENTIFIED 5 PRISON CAMPS WHERE AMERICANS WERE BEING HELD; BY 1969, HE SAYS, CIA AGENTS HAD CONFIRMED 45 SEPARATE POW COMPLEXES IN LAOS. A TOTAL OF 69 AMERICANS WAS KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN HELD IN LAO CAMPS, HE STATES, BUT THE (LAO) GOVERNMENT HAS NEVER RELEASED ANY ALIVE.

ANDERSON CITES AN ALLEGED STATE DEPARTMENT CABLE OF MAY 12, 1971 DISCLOSING THAT A SOURCE APPROACHED EMBASSY BANGKOK AND OFFERED TO ARRANGE A MEETING WITH A LAO PRINCE WHO WOULD SELL 30 AMERICAN PRISONERS FOR AROUND 250,000 DOLLARS APIECE, BUT THE EMBASSY LATER, "PRESUMABLY ACTING ON ADVICE FROM OPGGY BOTTOM," REJECTED THE PROPOSED DEAL "ON THE GROUND SIT WOULD BE TOO DANGEROUS FOR THE POW'S," HE SAYS.

ANDERSON ALSO NOTES A REFUGEE'S CLAIM TO HAVE DISCOVERED IN 1982 A SECRET PRISON CAMP IN NORTHERN LAOS, NEAR THE VIETNAMESE BORDER, WHERE AS MANY AS 50 AMERICANS WERE BEING HELD; HE EVEN PROVIDED INTELLIGENCE DEBRIEFERS WITH A MAP OF THE REGION AND THE LOCATION OF THE CAMP, HE SAYS.

LE BOUTILLIER STATES THAT "A TERRIBLE WRONG WAS COMMITTED 11 YEARS AGO: 566 SERVICEMEN LOST IN LAOS WERE ABANDONED WITHOUT A TRACE." HE MAINTAINS THAT, "PRIVATELY, DIA ANALYSTS CONCEDE THAT POWS ARE STILL ALIVE (IN LAOS), DIFFERING ONLY ON HOW MANY THERE ARE. THE MOST RECENT ESTIMATES RANGE FROM 20 TO 253," WHILE HUNDREDS OF REFUGEE REPORTS, "VERIFIED WITH 'LIE-DETECTOR' MACHINES, DESCRIBE SIMILAR SCENES: AMERICAN PILOTS ARE HELD VIRTUALLY AS SLAVES IN CAVES AND REMOTE VILLAGES, GUARDED BY VIETNAMESE AND LAOTIAN SOLDIERS..."

ACCORDING TO LEBOUTILLIER, NIXON PLEDGED \$3.25 BILLION IN RECONSTRUCTION FUNDS (PROVIDED CONGRESS APPROPRIATED THE MONEY AND HANOI HONORED THE PARIS PEACE ACCORDS) IN LETTER TO PHAM VAN LONG DATED FEB 1, 1973, IN EXCHANGE FOR WHICH HANOI WAS TO PROVIDE A COMPLETE LIST OF ALL POW'S IN LAOS -- WHICH IT DID NOT DO; TO THIS DAY IT HAS PROVIDED NO INFORMATION ON ANY OF THE 566," HE SAYS.

ON FEB 5, 1973, LEBOUTILLIER ADDS, A US BOMBER WITH 7 ABOARD WAS SHOT DOWN OVER LAOS, AND NSA RADIO INTERCEPTS CONFIRM 4 WERE TAKEN PRISONER; "NOTHING HAS BEEN DONE ABOUT THEM," HE STATES.

LEBOUTILLIER SAYS THAT WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR CONGRESS WOULDN'T VOTE THE MONEY NIXON HAD PROMISED, THE US OFFERED TO 100 MILLION DOLLARS IN MEDICINE FOR THE POW'S IN LAOS, BUT HANOI -- WHILE NOT DENYING POW'S WERE THERE, COUNTERED THAT IT WANTED THE MONEY NIXON PROMISED. SO "THE ADMINISTRATION WAS STUCK," HE SAYS, AND THE ISSUE THEN TOOK A BACK SEAT TO WATERGATE.

LEBOUTILLIER SAYS THE REASON THE SITUATION REMAINS

UNRESOLVED IS BECAUSE "HANOI'S POLICY IS NOT TO 'FIND' THE POWS UNTIL WASHINGTON STOPS SUPPORTING PEKING, OPENS FULL DIPLOMATIC RELATION WITH HANOI, AND MAKES GOOD ON ITS PROMISES." BUT THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION REFUSES TO IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH HANOI UNTIL VIETNAM MAKES A COMPLETE ACCOUNTING OF ALL POW'S, HE ADDS.

LE BOUTILLIER CONCLUDES THAT THE WAY TO BREAK THIS DILEMMA AND "THE ONLY WAY TO BRING HOME THE POWS IS TO SWALLOW SOME PRIDE IN ADMITTING THAT WE LOST THE WAR AND THAT HANOI HOLDS ALL THE CARDS. WE MUST PROVIDE, WITHOUT A QUID PRO QUO, A MULTI-BILLION DOLLAR RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAM INVOLVING MEDICINE, HOSPITALS, X-RAY EQUIPMENT, SCHOOLS, AND OTHER NON-MILITARY HUMANITARIAN AID. WE DON'T PUT A PRICE ON HUMAN LIFE. THE NORTH VIETNAMESE DO.

ROGERS NOTES THAT "NATIONAL VIETNAM VETERANS COALITION" NATIONAL COORDINATOR J THOMAS BURCH, JR IS TO HOLD A PRESS CONFERENCE IN DALLAS MONDAY MORNING TO PRESENT WHAT BURCH CALLED "CREDIBLE AND RELIABLE EVIDENCE...OUR COMRADES...ARE STILL BEING HELD IN CAPTIVITY AGAINST THEIR WILL" IN VIETNAM AND LAOS. BURCH IS QUOTED AS SAYING HIGH-LEVEL PENTAGON AND STATE OFFICIALS HAVE DOCUMENTARY "PROOF" OF LIVING POW'S, BUT "THEY HAVE COVERED UP THE TRUTH."

NOTING TALKS WITH VIETNAM CONCERNING RELEASE OF MIA REMAINS AND LAOS' AGREEMENT TO ALLOW A US TEAM TO SEARCH A CRASH SITE FOR POSSIBLE REMAINS, ROGERS SAYS THE FOCUS ON REMAINS OF THE DEAD, "TO THE APPARENT EXCLUSION OF EFFORTS TO FREE ANY LIVE PRISONERS IN VIETNAM OR LAOS," WAS A CHIEF TARGET OF CRITICISM BY BURCH'S GROUP.

ROGERS ADDS THE GROUP STATED THAT WHILE THEY DIDN'T WISH TO DISCREDIT REAGAN, WHO THEY SAID "HAS DONE THE MOST OF ANY US LEADER TO INCREASE THE FOCUS ON THE ISSUE," IF THE PRESIDENT DOES NOT FORM A TASK FORCE TO OVERSEE THIS POW PROBLEM'S ACTIVITIES, THEN THIS IS FAIR WARNING THAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR WILL PROBABLY GENERATE A COMPROMISING AND EMBARRASSING PROBLEM FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION."

EXPLAINING THE COMMENT, ROGERS RECALLS THAT FORMER DIA DIRECTOR GEN TIGHE HAD SAID THAT A "PRIVATE SECTOR" RESCUE OF A POW WOULD BE AN "EMBARRASSMENT" TO THE GOVERNMENT.