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208

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# MOSCOW'S POISON WAR--UPDATE

## INTRODUCTION

Compelling evidence keeps mounting that the Soviet Union and its proxies continue to use illegal chemical and toxin weapons in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan. Noted then Secretary of State Alexander Haig in a television interview on February 14, 1982: "every passing day...we get more incontrovertible evidence of the use of mycotoxins in Afghanistan, Laos and Kampuchea. We now even have specific evidence of casualties of noncombatants which are in the range of scores of thousands in all three target areas. There is no question in our mind that such weapons have been and are continuing to be used."[1] Max Kampelman, chief U.S. delegate to the European Security Conference in Madrid, charged on February 16 that the Soviets were operating twenty chemical and biological weapons facilities in violation of international law.

In late March, the State Department released a special report, Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, documenting reports of 397 communist chemical attacks which killed over ten thousand people--6,300 in Laos, 980 in Kampuchea (Cambodia) and over 3,000 in Afghanistan. These are minimum figures, based on eyewitness accounts. Other estimates of chemical warfare deaths range as high as 50,000.

The evidence presented in the report comes from a wide variety of sources--refugees, freedom fighters, communist defectors, doctors in refugee camps, Western journalists and

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1 ABC "This Week," February 14, 1982.

Western intelligence agencies. These human intelligence data were buttressed by photographic and electronic intelligence data, as well as by scientific evidence based on the analysis of physical samples taken from the sites of chemical attacks. According to the State Department:

> Taken together, this evidence has led the U.S. Government to conclude that Lao and Vietnamese forces, operating under Soviet supervision, have, since 1975, employed lethal chemical and toxin weapons in Laos; that Vietnamese forces have, since 1978, used lethal chemical and toxin agents in Kampuchea; and that Soviet forces have used a variety of lethal chemical warfare agents, including nerve gases, in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion of that country in 1979.[2]

NEW EVIDENCE

The report unveiled two new developments. First, it revealed that dead Afghan freedom fighters had been found lying in firing positions with their hands frozen on their rifles, indicating that they were victims of an extremely fast-acting lethal chemical or toxin not detectable by human senses. It apparently causes no outward physiological responses before death. This new weapon is grimly nicknamed "silent death." As a second new development, the State Department report confirmed charges made by the Committee for a Free Afghanistan that Moscow was using a chemical or toxin weapon that induced the flesh of its victims to decay extremely rapidly after death. When the bodies of such victims are touched or moved, the skin often peels off in large sheets.

The U.S. government continues to collect and analyze scores of samples of lethal chemical and toxin agents used on Asian battlefields. On May 13, the Department of State released conclusive evidence that tricothecene mycotoxins comprise at least some of the poisonous active ingredients of the mysterious "Yellow Rain" terror weapon. Blood and urine samples from four victims of a Vietnamese chemical attack in Kampuchea contained T-2 toxin. Blood samples from control individuals of closely matched age and background who had not been exposed to the "Yellow Rain" showed no trace of T-2 or other tricothecenes. Environmental control samples of vegetation, soil, water, rice and corn in the region also contained no tricothecenes. It is therefore highly unlikely that the victims of tricothecene poisoning were contaminated by substances found in their natural environment, as had been suggested by some of those who ignored earlier reports of communist poisoned earth tactics.

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[2] United States Department of State, Special Report No. 98, Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, March 22, 1982, p. 6.

climates.[4] And even if the Soviet arguments concerning the origin of poisonous mycotoxins in Southeast Asia were plausible (which they are not), what explains the presence of these same mycotoxins in Afghanistan, thousands of miles away from "American-sown" elephant grass? In summary, Moscow has yet to offer a reasonable explanation to counter the charges that it has been waging poison warfare.

## THE UNITED NATIONS INVESTIGATES

The U.N. investigation of communist biochemical warfare activities continues to dismay those concerned with getting at the truth of the matter. The investigation this year is proceeding at the same lethargic pace the U.N. set for itself in 1981. The group of experts chosen by the U.N. to investigate these alleged violations of international law is headed by General Esmat Ezz of Egypt. He is believed to have played a prominent role in his country's chemical weapons program during the 1960s when the Egyptians were associated closely with Soviet military advisers. The staff of the investigative group is drawn from Poland, Bulgaria, Kenya, Peru and the Philippines. As fine as these investigators may be, they have been thwarted in their work. They have been forbidden, for example, to visit the alleged scenes of poison attacks by the pro-Soviet regimes of Afghanistan, Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam. If these governments are truly innocent of biochemical warfare charges, as they profess to be, why do they not welcome U.N. experts? Instead, these nations and the U.S.S.R. have used every opportunity to block the investigation.

President Reagan appealed to the Soviet, Laotian, and Vietnamese governments to cooperate with the U.N. effort when he addressed the U.N. Special Session on Disarmament on June 17: "We call upon them now to grant full and free access to their countries or to territories they control so that U.N. experts can conduct an effective, independent investigation to verify cessation of these horrors." So far there has been no response.

Although denied access to the attack sites, the U.N.'s real problem is less lack of evidence than lack of political will to do anything about the evidence. This is hardly surprising since the U.N. investigation is overseen by U.N. Undersecretary General Viacheslav Ustinov, a Soviet official who has used bureaucratic inertia and delaying tactics to stall and smother the investigation. At one point, Ustinov even tried to pressure the team to use a laboratory of his own choosing to analyze samples of chemical agents. Despite the fact that the U.N. has had in its possession chemical warfare agents from Southeast Asia for many months, it has yet to complete the laboratory analysis of these samples. Indeed, this crucial evidence has been stashed in an unguarded U.N. freezer for months.

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[4] For an excellent analysis of the faulty reasoning behind the Soviet "elephant grass theory" see: "Yellow Rain: Filling in the Gaps," Science, July 2, 1982.

U.S. charges of Soviet chemical warfare activities have been officially supported by an independent team of Canadian investigators that visited Thailand in February 1982 to conduct on-site inspections, interview victims and analyze the pattern of mycotoxin poisoning in the area. According to the Canadians:

> The events that are reported to take place at the time of alleged chemical warfare attacks cannot be explained on the basis of naturally occurring diseases. Neither mycotoxicoses nor other diseases occur in Southeast Asia which might be able to cause the rapid onset of symptoms or the effects on all sorts of forms of life (human, animal and plant life) that is reported to occur. Judging on the basis of eyewitness reports it appears that three different types of agents have been employed as warfare agents, one of them being "Yellow Rain".[3]

## THE SOVIET REACTION

The initial Soviet strategy for dealing with allegations of illegal chemical warfare activities was to play down the issue or confuse the argument by hollering--incorrectly--about American "biological warfare attacks" and the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. As these attempts to distract Western public opinion failed, however, Moscow mounted a new propaganda offensive. On May 21, the Soviet mission to the United Nations issued a nineteen-page critique, "Chemical and Bacteriological Weapons," designed to refute Western accounts of Soviet and Vietnamese chemical warfare operations. The Soviet tract conceded that the deadly tricothecene mycotoxins have been found in Southeast Asia, but maintained that these toxins were produced by the fusarium fungus which supposedly thrives in elephant grass that was artificially seeded from the air by American military aircraft during the Vietnam war.

This explanation is dismissed as "science fiction" by Paul Nelson, one of the world's foremost authorities on the fusarium fungus. Nelson is a plant pathologist at Pennsylvania State University who has catalogued more than 6,000 isolates of fusarium, 300 of them toxin-producers. In all his extensive studies, he never has encountered any references to a toxin-producing fusarium fungus in Southeast Asia. Although the fusarium fungus grows naturally in nearly every part of the world, Nelson noted that it produces strong toxins only in cold and temperate

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[3] H.B. Schiefer Toxicology Group, University of Saskatchewan, Study of the Possible Use of Chemical Warfare Agents in Southeast Asia, A Report to the Department of External Affairs, Canada, 1982, p. i.

In February 1982, the U.N. group of experts visited Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan where it obtained eyewitness testimony, medical findings and physical evidence of biological warfare. This information has been quietly shelved (some say suppressed), presumably because Ustinov predictably preferred not to embarrass the Soviet Union at the U.N. Special Session on Disarmament in June. Eventually the evidence was made public when it was leaked to the Wall Street Journal, which published excerpts from the group's 36-page transcript of interviews with victims and eye-witnesses of Soviet biochemical attacks in Afghanistan.

According to these interviews, the Soviets were using more than just "Yellow Rain." Afghan freedom fighters told of poisoned "dumdum" bullets and flechettes (steel darts) which caused blistering, swelling and sometimes death from relatively minor wounds. They told of "black smoke" that rendered victims unconscious or paralyzed. They gave the U.N. team samples of contaminated wheat grains, poisoned bullets, a flechette, a gas mask, part of a parachute from a chemical bomb and a fuse from a chemical hand bomb.[5]

To date, the U.N. has done little to analyze the evidence of chemical munitions that Afghans and Southeast Asians have risked their lives to retrieve from remote battlefields. By engaging in what appears to be a coverup of Soviet chemical warfare attacks, the U.N. is jeopardizing its own credibility and integrity as an international institution.

CONCLUSION

The challenge is now to the U.N. The evidence, long persuasive, is now undeniable. Even Moscow has been forced to admit the presence of some poison substance on the battlefields where its weapons are being used. For the United Nations, in the face of all of this, to do nothing would be tantamount to legitimizing chemical warfare. It would also be tantamount to confirming that the U.N., which misses few opportunities to condemn the U.S. and other Western democracies, fears to point an accusatory finger at Moscow. And all the while, Moscow's poison weapons continue to rain upon Afghans and Southeast Asians.

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5 "Chemical-Biological Warfare in Afghanistan", Wall Street Journal, June 7, 1982.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION


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