

US chemical weapons testing scandal in Thailand

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Details are continuing to emerge from Thailand of a growing scandal and cover-up involving the US and Thai military, environmental agencies and the Thai government, concerning US chemical weapons testing in Thailand in 1964-65.

Science, Technology and Environmental Minister Suvit Khunkitti has received documents from the US Ambassador to Thailand confirming that Agent Orange and other chemicals were tested by the military in Pran Buri and Bo Fai. US officials, however, insist that no chemicals were dumped haphazardly after the tests were completed.

Khunkitti said details of the Thai Defense Ministry's involvement in the operations would remain secret. PCD chief Saksit Tridech backed his minister, saying, "it is the Defense Ministry's policy not to reveal details about these chemical tests to the public".

The scandal began to develop in late February, when a chemical dump was unearthed at Bo Fai airport in Hua Hin, during the construction of a runway. Immediately the government and its official environmental agency, the Pollution Control Department (PCD) went into damage control, denying that there was any evidence to suggest that Agent Orange was present in the soil. The greater likelihood, they claimed, was that the chemicals were paint solvents.

When soil samples were sent to the US and Canada for dioxin tests (Thailand does not possess the technology for these tests) contradictions began to appear in the official media releases. Director General of the Department of Medical Sciences, Renu Koysuko, confirmed that derivatives of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, two major dioxins contained in Agent Orange, were discovered in soil recovered from Bo Fai airport. This conflicted with earlier claims from the Agricultural

Department and the US Environmental Protection Agency that no such chemicals were evident in the soil.

The US dumped more than 19 million gallons of Agent Orange, a defoliant, on Indochina during the Vietnam War. Nearly three kilograms of such toxic chemicals were used per head of the Vietnamese population. Health authorities estimate that up to 50,000 children have been born with birth defects as a result.

This chemical saturation was one of the most shameful chapters in the history of the US military, dwarfing the use of poisonous gases in World War One. The US military aimed not just to defoliate the jungle but also destroy the crops that fed the Vietnamese people. The entire country's environment was destroyed and is still recovering to this day. US soldiers were also affected, with 250,000 suspected cases of toxic harm.

The comprehensive use of chemical weapons violated the 1925 Geneva Protocol that prohibited "the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases". The 1907 Hague Convention also forbade the use of poison or poisoned weapons.

Agent Orange and other dioxins are extremely hazardous to human beings. The US EPA has admitted that there is no safe exposure level. US National Cancer Institute tests have proved that dioxins cause fetal death and deformity, miscarriage, chromosome damage and cancer. In a recent study, the Cancer Institute proved that humans with a high exposure to dioxins (TCDD) have a 60 percent greater risk of dying from cancer. The presence of other herbicidal chemicals magnified the effects.

There is evidence of birth defects in Thailand. A textbook *Environment and Ecology*, written in the early 1970s by Kasetsart University lecturer Somchit Pongpangan, who participated in the research at Bo Fai

and Pran Buri, shows that 20 local villagers were employed at the test site. One of them, a woman, who used to collect filters known to be contaminated with Agent Orange, gave birth to a child with an abnormal chest bone.

The identity and whereabouts of the woman and her family are unknown, but this evidence begs the question of how many more victims there are in Thailand, particularly among those who worked in and around the various military bases. Further chemical dumps are likely to exist. Agent Orange was sprayed from light planes, so that runways and chemical supply bases could have been set up anywhere. Thailand was also one of the US military's most important supply routes during the war.

Moreover, the land at Pran Buri has been turned into prime agricultural land, raising serious health concerns for the inhabitants. Recent events in Belgium have shown how easily dioxins can be spread throughout the food chain.

In addition, Hua Hin is an extremely busy tourist resort. Among Thais it is the most popular holiday destination. The Tourism Authority of Thailand expressed its horror but, fearing a backlash from tourists and damage to the business community, suggested that the chemicals in the soil could not be "as nasty as some people imagine".

In an attempt to contain the scandal, the Thai government has established a working group, containing government scientists and PCD officials. Its ability to unearth the truth has already been thrown into doubt by the Thai military's insistence on keeping secret its part in the operations. As for Washington, its interests in ensuring a cover-up are all the greater in the light of the toxic damage inflicted on Yugoslavia over the past two months.



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