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THE KOREA TIMES

USFK to Interview Ex-employee in Agent Orange Probe

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The U.S. military in South Korea said Saturday it will interview one of its former civilian employees who claims he witnessed the burial of toxic chemical Agent Orange inside a U.S. army camp in the South in the 1970s.

South Korea and the U.S. are jointly investigating claims by retired U.S. soldiers that they had helped dump large amounts of the toxic chemical in 1978 inside Camp Carroll in Chilgok, 300 kilometers southeast of Seoul.

In another claim that could support the allegations, Koo Ja-young, a former South Korean contract worker living in Washington, told Yonhap News Agency earlier this week that he had witnessed the burial of Agent Orange at that time.

Koo, who worked for the U.S. military in South Korea for 33 years since the late 1960s, claimed that other harmful chemicals were also buried at Camp Carroll in 1972. He pinpointed the bachelor officers' quarters and installation fire department as the burial sites.

In Seoul, Lt. Gen. John D. Johnson, commander of the Eighth U.S. Army who heads the U.S. investigation into the case, said his team plans to "ask him (Koo) to help pinpoint the exact location and provide details about the incident he described to the media."

"If his allegations prove to be a credible risk to health, this location will be included in the search area," he said in a statement. "Our primary concern is the health and safety of the people on the post and in the adjacent communities. If we find anything harmful to human health, we will fix it."

However, the statement gave few details including when the interview would be held. Officials at the Eighth Army's public relations team were not immediately available for comments.

Agent Orange, a defoliant widely used in the Vietnam War, is suspected of causing serious health problems, including cancer and genetic damage, among

some people, as well as birth defects in their children. The defoliant was contaminated by dioxin, a highly toxic substance.

Early this week, USFK said a 1992 study showed a "large amount" of pesticides, herbicides and solvents were buried at Camp Carroll in 1978, but were removed and taken to an unknown site during the following two years.

The USFK also said its review of records found "trace amounts" of dioxin in a 2004 test at the site, but the findings do not "directly" indicate that Agent Orange was buried there.

Despite a U.S. pledge for a swift investigation, impatience and frustration are growing among residents in Chilgok amid slow progress in the probe. Chilgok, a rural town, has some 30,000 residents.

Park Hyung-joo, a 48-year-old resident, said, "As a farmer near the U.S. military base, I feel nervous about the existence of the cancer-causing material." Park referred to the U.S. military's announcement that a tiny amount of dioxin was found.

"Because the cancer-causing material was found inside the U.S. military base, is there a possibility that the material may have leaked to the outside?" Park asked.

An independent probe commissioned by Chilgok County also found traces of dioxin in some groundwater near Camp Carroll this week. But no clear links were found that the dioxin is related to the U.S. military base. As a precautionary measure, the county suspended the use of some groundwater.

Environmental contamination has become a major source of concern for South Koreans after the U.S. military returned some of its bases in the South. Some 28,500 American service members are currently stationed in the country, a legacy of the 1950-53 Korean War. (Yonhap)

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/05/113_87851.html