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USFK sprayed defoliant from 1955 to 1995, new testimony suggests

한겨레신문 - Tue 31 May, 2011

[한겨레] Other USFK veterans and S.Koreans attest to spraying defoliants, damaging the environment and health

By Kwon Tae-ho, Washington Correspondent

An official U.S. government document confirms that the country's military sprayed defoliant in South Korea for a far longer period than had previously been officially stated.

According to a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) document obtained by the Hankyoreh on Sunday (local time), the period during which defoliant was sprayed in South Korea was recorded internally as being from 1962 to 1970.

In an official document sent in 2009 to a former U.S. soldier suffering from after-effects of defoliant exposure to explain about compensation and other matters, the department wrote that the defoliants Agent Orange, Agent Blue, and monuron were sprayed between 1962 and 1970 over an area extending from below the South Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone to the area of the 1st U.S. Corps command and the First ROK Army.

The department further noted that this was confirmed by a document sent to it by the U.S. Army Center for Unit Records Research on July 23, 2008, and that the defoliant was delivered by sprayers and by spraying devices mounted on trailers. At the time, the 1st U.S. Corps was positioned in the West over the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division, which oversaw the northern side of the Han River, while the 1st ROK Army had authority over the eastern front in Gangwon. This is leading experts to surmise that defoliant was sprayed over a wide area of the DMZ during the entire decade of the 1960s.

Suspensions are also being voiced that the Department of Veterans Affairs officially reduced the actual defoliant spray time. After the first confirmation of defoliant spraying in the DMZ area in 1968 through 1995 testimony in the U.S. Senate, South Korean and U.S. authorities announced two spraying periods of "April to May 1968" and "May to July 1969." This indicates that in spite of official claims to the contrary, the U.S. Army was already aware of the spraying of defoliant in South Korea for a far longer period.

The U.S. is known to handle compensation for individual injury claims without making any blanket admission.

Accounts have also emerged about defoliant spraying in the DMZ during the mid-1950s. Speaking to the Hankyoreh on Monday, seventy-seven-year-old retired Army First Sergeant Eum Do-nam of Yeoncheon County said, "While I was working at the Army's 15th Infantry Division at Baengma-goji [in Cheolwon County, Gangwon] in 1955, the U.S. military carried out aerial spraying of defoliant in the DMZ three or four times a month with helicopters and other aircraft."

With a string of other eyewitness accounts surfacing on web sites for retired USFK troops, including reports of defoliant spraying in 1972 at Chuncheon's Camp Page and a blanket order in 1978 to remove defoliants, observers say a full reinvestigation of the period of defoliant spraying in South Korea appears inevitable.

Please direct questions or comments to [englishhani@hani.co.kr]

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