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Agent Orange Tested in Panama in the 1960's and 70's

News Note: Agent Orange in Panama

The Dallas Morning News recently reported that the U.S. military conducted secret tests of Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides in Panama in the 1960s and '70s, potentially exposing civilians and soldiers to highly dangerous chemicals. According to eyewitness accounts and documents, hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange were shipped to Panama during the Vietnam War to be tested in simulated tropical battlefield conditions of Southeast Asia. The chemical was a mixture of the herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T and also contained dioxin generated during formulation of 2,4,5-T. While the two herbicides break down in the environment rather quickly, dioxin is a highly persistent compound that remains in the environment for decades and can cause cancer, birth defects and other health and developmental problems.

The U.S. Southern Command, the operational authority in Panama, said it was not aware of any tests using Agent Orange that had taken place there. However, the U.S. Veterans Affairs Department acknowledged that use of Agent Orange or similar herbicides contributed to the deaths of at least three U.S. servicemen stationed in Panama in the 1960s and '70s. In testimony at a Veterans Affairs hearing regarding one of these cases, a former operations officer for herbicide research at the Army biological research and development laboratories in Maryland stated that "several hundred drums" of Agent Orange were shipped to Panama in the late 1960s.

For years, the Panamanian government has been trying to find proof that the U.S. used chemical weapons and herbicides there in an effort to obtain compensation for cleanup costs as well as possible damages. Panama is already seeking as much as US\$500 million from the U.S. military in damages and cleanup costs related to thousands of acres used for weapons tests since World War II.

Sources: "Report: U.S. Exposed Many in Panama to Agent Orange," San Francisco Examiner, August 20, 1999.

"Report: Agent Orange in Panama," Associated Press, August 20, 1999.

Contact: PANNA.

Agent Orange tested secretly in Panama August 20, 1999

The US military tested Agent Orange and other herbicides by secretly spraying them in Panama at the height of the Vietnam War, according to the DALLAS MORNING NEWS. Members of the U.S. military, as well as civilians, may have been exposed to the extremely toxic chemical. Though it says all reports are unproven, the military reportedly tested the chemical over Panama because its tropical forests are similar to those in Vietnam. In Vietnam, The US sprayed Agent Orange to rapidly kill the tropical forests in which they suspected Viet Cong guerillas were hiding. According to one American veteran, the military sprayed Agent Orange near populated areas in Panama, including a beach, a club, and a lake from which Panama City gets its drinking water. In addition to those who may have been exposed to the chemical in the '60s and '70s, an environmental sciences expert said Agent Orange could last in the soil for decades. Panama is already seeking up to \$500 million from the US for cleanup, and they expect claims of personal damages as well. Some point out that the US did not know how dangerous Agent Orange could be for those exposed. The Veterans Administration now recognizes nine diseases and disorders to be linked to Agent Orange exposure.

Agent Orange Affects Soldiers' Health by John Lindsay-Poland

Chemical bomb shell on San Jose Island, Panama.

The United States conducted military tests with Agent Orange in Panama in the late 1960s, according to a former military officials and some veterans who now suffer from Agent Orange-related diseases. A veteran who has a medical claim before the Veterans Administration wrote to Panamá Update in June that he saw U.S. Special Forces drop Agent Orange onto Fort Sherman in 1969 or 1970 and "watched the jungle disappear over the next few days." An Army engineer whose duty it was to take water samples, he also found high levels of Agent Orange in the coral reefs on Pacific side of the canal. Lake Gatun, where he witnessed the spraying, spills out of the canal into the Pacific reefs.

He now suffers from peripheral neuropathy, a disease common to veterans exposed to Agent Orange. In addition, Pamela Jones, the widow of another Army veteran who served in Panama, was awarded benefits in February by the Veterans Administration because of her husband's exposure to Agent Orange in Panama in the early 1970s. At her benefits hearing, the government's former head of the Agent Orange litigation project, Charles Bartlett, testified that several hundred barrels of Agent Orange had been shipped to Panama in the mid-1960s for tests. He said that after the tests the barrels remained in Panama for use in controlling weeds. At least nine witnesses have confirmed that the military sprayed heavily with Agent Orange in an area of Fort Sherman known as the "drop zone"

in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The "drop zone" is located not far from a popular beach, recreation center and sporting club on the shores of Lake Gatun. The revelation is important because it establishes that Southeast Asia was not the only place where the United States exposed soldiers, and perhaps others, to Agent Orange.

Until Jones won her claim, the Veterans Administration had institutionalized Agent Orange-related benefits for those who fought in Vietnam, and excluded others from consideration for such benefits. One of the veterans awarded benefits because of his exposure to Agent Orange was Joseph Oppedisano, who served with the Army in Panama in 1956-58. Although Oppedisano's documented exposure to Agent Orange occurred later, in Camp Drumm, New York, while in Panama he became very sick after training with chemical agents. On January 4, 1958, the entire island of Flamenco where he was stationed was defoliated, Oppedisano told Panamá Update. "We had about ten million fish die. They got stuck on the rocks and made a stink," he said. He thought it was a secret military test. He and other soldiers on the island became violently ill and were hospitalized. One of those soldiers, Israel Jewetz, testified that "the areas where we were barracked were sprayed with chemicals every day to control insect populations and prevent malaria and yellow fever outbreaks." Oppedisano developed hairy cell leukemia as a result of his exposures. The Dallas Morning News spoke to both the veteran and Ms. Jones, and published two stories on August 20 and 24 about the issue.

In the August 20 story, U.S. Southern Command spokesman Raul Duany said that if Agent Orange was sprayed, "it wouldn't pose a threat today because it should have dissipated by now." However, the dioxin contained in most Agent Orange - the toxin that causes disease - remains in the soil for decades. The retired officer who ordered the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam as a defoliant contradicted Duany's claim. "It does not dissipate," said Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. "If it's true that Agent Orange was tested in Panama, it is clear that the spokesman was wrong about the residual stuff."

Pesticides May Be Affecting Health

New information is also emerging about the heavy use of other kinds of pesticides in military bases in Panama besides Agent Orange, such as DDT and Chlordane, which were sprayed in residential areas of the Canal Zone, often daily, against termites. Both pesticides are banned in the United States. According to a preliminary study commissioned by Panama, "Though there is not enough data to establish a concise exposure scenario, there are plenty of indicators that demonstrate a significant human health hazard exists." The study, which took samples from Corozal and Clayton,

concluded that "DDT, DDD, and DDE were all found in high quantities" on the two bases. But the United States has not given Panama information on the application rates of these pesticides, according to a consultant for the Panamanian government. This is forcing Panama to consider health studies that can demonstrate the ill effects of the pesticides on surrounding populations. An employee of Lockheed-Martin, which has been under contract to the Defense Department since 1996 to haul out toxic wastes from Panama, reported receiving a broad range of wastes.

"We were handling cyanides, asbestos, poisons, known carcinogens, herbicides, pesticides," said Alfredo Smith, a supervisor at the Lockheed warehouse on Corozal base in Panama. "Some of this stuff had labels going back to the 1950s." Smith told The Dallas Morning News that a Panamanian working under him began coughing up blood one day, after handling an unmarked barrel filled with a chemical powder. Smith himself experiences headaches, rashes, and other problems, and is suing Lockheed-Martin for lax safety procedures. Press reports on chemicals used in the canal area have stimulated a number of memories about problems in the past. Former Canal Zone resident Don DeStaffino remembered a 10- or 12-year-old Panamanian child who died in the 1970s "in a jungle area of Howard AFB/Ft.Kobbe... The substance with which he came in contact that caused his death was in a 55 gallon barrel. I believe it was a yellow color, and a gel rather than a powder. I think the substance was claimed by the Air Force as a paint remover."

Sources: Interview with Joseph Oppedisano, 9/6/99;

brief supporting Oppedisano appeal to Board of Veterans Appeals, 9/21/92;

"Exposure Scenario Characterization for Human Health Risk Assessment due to Pesticide Contamination in the Canal Area," September 2, 1999;

Dallas Morning News 8/20; 8/24; 10/11/99;

Stars and Stripes 9/12/99;

e-mails to FOR by veteran, 6/99;

Don DeStaffino communication 10/12/99.