

U.S. Finds No New Proof of Soviet Chemical War

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — A State Department report presented to the United Nations today said that there was no confirmed use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan last year and that the deadliness of chemical warfare attacks in Laos and Cambodia had diminished substantially.

The four-page document also revealed that no sample of environmental or physical material analysed in 1983 was found to contain trichothecene mycotoxins, the kind of poison that the United States had accused the Soviet

Union of spraying in previous years.

Such toxic sprays have been called "yellow rain" by Southeast Asian tribesmen who contend that people have become sick or died after exposure to the yellowish substance.

The report, titled "New Preliminary Findings for 1983," reiterated that only one of the human biological samples tested — blood collected in Laos from a Cambodian woman who said she had passed through an area attacked by chemicals — was found to contain trichothecene mycotoxins, as previously stated in August.

A Government official active in yellow

rain reviews said the tests last year, through mid-November, covered 47 environmental and physical samples from Laos, 22 from Cambodia, and 8 from Afghanistan. None contained trichothecene mycotoxins.

There were also 36 sets of human biological samples, mostly blood and urine, from Cambodia, 29 sets from Laos, and none from Afghanistan.

The latest findings were taken by one critic as evidence that the United States may have erred in its original charges that the Soviet Union and its allies were using chemical weapons.

"The document strikes me as a retreat," said Dr. Matthew S. Meselson, a Harvard molecular biologist. "I hope it is now being realized in the Government that the evidence for any kind of chemical warfare in Southeast Asia is crumbling away."

The United States Government contends that intelligence intercepts and reports from refugees, defectors and relief workers indicate that chemical agents are being used, while laboratory tests demonstrate that trichothecenes mycotoxins have been used.

The official involved in yellow rain issues said the original charges were still supported by evidence. He said a possible reason for the diminution in the use of chemical weapons may have been a change in military tactics or the abandonment of chemical warfare under the pressure of charges from the United States.

However, the academic critics, of whom Dr. Meselson is the most prominent, assert that the Government's case is weak. They contend that the "yellow spots" examined so far are nothing but the excrement of bees, which contains yellowish pollen. They also suggest that the trichothecene toxins found in environmental samples and in the blood of some alleged victims were produced naturally by fungi and then contaminated both the bee feces and the food eaten by people who show toxins in their blood.

"I am certain now that the yellow rain samples handled are in fact bee droppings," Dr. Meselson said today. "And I strongly suspect that the trichothecenes are of natural occurrence."

The document issued today said that reports of chemical attacks in Afghanistan had dropped from "several dozen" in 1982, resulting in more than 300 deaths, to "several" in 1983, none of which could be confirmed as valid from two or more types of sources.

In Laos, the document said, the use of toxic agents declined in 1983 and the deaths and illness they caused was one-third the 1982 level. In Cambodia, the use of toxins remained the same as in 1982 but the number of deaths that resulted "decreased significantly."

The report suggests that an unidentified nonlethal chemical agent or agents are being used in Laos and Cambodia.

It also "notes with deep concern re-