

Committee on Foreign Affairs

"USE OF CHEMICAL AGENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA SINCE THE VIETNAM WAR"

Good morning, thank you for attending. Today's hearing is entitled "Use of Chemical Agents in Southeast Asia Since the Vietnam War."

For some time now, we have heard disturbing reports that the H'Mong people of Laos have been the victims of the concerted use of "poison gas," or, more accurately, chemical agents. It has proven extremely difficult to document these reports, both in terms of whether the attacks actually took place, and who carried them out, or sponsored them.

However, I now feel that based on in-depth interviews with refugees over a long period of time, and chemical analysis of samples recovered from Laos, we can state that the H'Mong people have been subjected to a variety of chemical agents, some deliberately lethal, some incapacitating in varying degrees, from 1976 through at least May of this year.

The purpose of this hearing is to discuss these interviews and lab tests with expert witnesses, and to pursue possible solutions to the use of chemical warfare.

During the course of the summer, it appeared that as despicable as the use of chemical agents might have been, no reports had been received since May indicating continued use of such materials against the H'Mong. Thus, it appeared that a long and difficult diplomatic campaign quietly carried out by the Department of State on behalf of the H'Mong had been successful.

Not wishing to turn a genuine humanitarian concern into a propaganda "American issue," at least as perceived by the Vietnamese and others, the Subcommittee therefore determined to monitor the chemical agent issue through means other than public hearings. While not entirely satisfied with this, the Subcommittee felt that so long as chemical agents did not appear to be currently in use, a public hearing might not help other diplomatic initiatives in the region.

Now, however, we are in receipt of reports that "poison gas" -- chemical agents -- are actively being used in Cambodia by the Vietnamese. Reports from the Pol Pot side can perhaps best be automatically toned down, if not entirely discounted. But enough reports from other sources are coming in to suggest that despite the excellent work of the State Department, the issue of poison gas -- illegal chemical agents -- is very much a current concern in Southeast Asia.

It would appear that having "tested" poison gas against the H'Mong people of Laos, Vietnam is now using lethal chemical agents against the people of Cambodia.

This Subcommittee, and our witnesses today, are determined that the difficulty of gathering information which kept us silent for so long on Laos shall not inhibit us on Cambodia.

As I said, we are now satisfied that lethal chemical agents were systematically used on the H'Mong people of Laos. Deaths are difficult to estimate, but can be assumed to be well over a thousand, perhaps many times that, since certain types of gas were more devastating than others.

So the time to put a halt to the extension of the use of chemical agents into Cambodia is now -- at the outset of the reports -- rather than later, after the damage has been done.

With that basic motive in mind, I would note that the title of this hearing is "Use of Chemical Agents In Southeast Asia Since the Vietnam War." I would like to emphasize the word "since," because I do not feel that today is the time to get into the debate over American use of the so-called "Agent Orange."

We reject the charge that since the United States used a chemical agent as a defoliant -- however ill-advised or brutal that may have been -- we have no right to attempt to halt the use of overtly deadly chemical agents at this time.

I do think that, as Congressmen, we must help our Government accept the responsibility which use of "Agent Orange" implies regarding the American military personnel exposed to it, but that is a topic for other hearings.

Finally, I would note that whatever the problems we faced in Laos in identifying which military forces actually used the chemical agents, in Cambodia, we have no such inhibitions. The position of the Vietnamese as the occupying power and chief military agent is clear, and it is Vietnam which must bear the responsibility for using lethal chemical agents in Southeast Asia.

A word for the Soviet Union: again, no indisputable evidence currently exists to link the Soviets as the source of the chemical agents being used by Vietnam. None-the-less, as the principal sponsor of Hanoi, particularly in the military sphere, special responsibility resides with the U.S.S.R. to join with the United States in seeking to permanently outlaw the use of chemical agents in warfare.

Thus we welcome H. Res. 451, now before us, and will ask its sponsors, Mr. Leach of Iowa and Mr. Pritchard of Washington, to discuss their resolution.