

STATEMENT FOR THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIAN AND
PACIFIC AFFAIRS
BY DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE EVELYN COLBERT
DECEMBER 12, 1979

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss reports of use of poison gas in Indochina.

Many of the members of the Hmong (Mao) hilltribes minority arriving in Thailand as refugees from Laos have reported chemical attacks by Vietnamese/Lao forces in Laos. In some cases, they have stated that they were the actual victims of such attacks. These attacks, directed against both civilian and military targets, are reported to have occurred from 1974 to as recently as May 1979. As we have already heard, we do not have absolute proof of these charges; however, the result of U.S. government investigations support the conclusion that some chemical agent or agents were being used in Laos during the period in question, as part of the Lao government's effort to bring the Hmong under its control.

The years of enmity between the Hmong and the lowland Lao and Vietnamese have left bitterness on both sides. During the Indochina wars, one faction of the Hmong worked with the Lao and Vietnamese communists. However, the majority of the Hmong supported French and later American efforts to forestall a Vietnamese communist victory in Laos. With their unmatched skills as guerrilla fighters, the Hmong played an important military role for both the U.S. and France. When the Communists came to power in Vientiane in 1975, a few Hmong settled under Lao-Vietnamese control semi-voluntarily. However, many of the Hmong who had been allied with the French and the U.S. continued their guerrilla resistance in remote upland areas, threatening land communications and attacking isolated Lao and Vietnamese units. Other

many retreated deeper into the mountains of northern Laos or fled to Thailand. Those that continued their resistance did so without any U.S. assistance, then or now, drawing instead largely upon cached weapons and ammunition and inspired by their perennial fears of control by the dominant lowland Lao and the Vietnamese. Most Hmong have seen their actions as defensive and that of the Vietnamese and Lao Government forces as an attempt to eradicate Hmong tribes, at least those who are former followers of General Vang Pao and their families in Phu Bia and Phu Ma Thao.

The Lao Government, with strong Vietnamese assistance, is waging a military campaign against the 300,000 Hmong. This campaign is aimed ultimately at resettling them, primarily in the lowlands and plains where they can be more easily controlled. The government contends that such resettlement is essential to its security. It fears foreign support of the Hmong insurgency if the Hmong are left in remote areas. It is also the policy of the Lao Government to put an end to the Hmong traditional practice of slash and burn agriculture which, results each year, in the destruction of valuable timber, one of Laos's few natural resources.

The practical effect of this campaign has been to create great hardship for many Hmong, resulting in the flight to Thailand of approximately one fifth of the Hmong population of Laos.

Beginning in 1974, and gradually increasing in frequency in 1976 and 1977, there were reports of use of poison gas by Lao and Vietnamese troops against insurgent Hmong tribes. All of the reports on this subject referred to air delivery of a chemical agent (or agents) causing illness or death. Descriptions given

by refugees of color and other characteristics of the agents and the symptoms of the illnesses caused vary widely. Several reports told of repeated chemical attacks on Hmong villages under the control of the Lao Government.

I should emphasize that as we have heard it has been very difficult to obtain physical evidence of poison gas. Some of the symptoms described could possibly result from materials other than lethal poison gas, e.g., defoliants, riot control agents, phosphorous shells, etc. The physical evidence of most toxic agents normally dissipates very rapidly. In addition persons severely affected by toxic agents would be unable to survive the long journey to Thai refugee camps and this, in effect, has ruled out the possibility of physical examination.

Nevertheless, as we can see in the materials released today, we believe that the reports are numerous enough to warrant our attention and concern. In 1977 we had begun a dialogue with U.S. agencies and other governments as well as with Lao officials in which we sought to focus concern on the welfare of Hmong caught up in Lao-Vietnamese resettlement schemes. The Chairman has already mentioned our diplomatic efforts in this regard. In early October, 1978, we specifically raised our concern about the reports of gas use in Laos with the Lao Chargé d'Affaires in Washington. Later in October, Assistant Secretary Richard Holbrooke in Vientiane reiterated to the Lao leaders our concern over Hmong human rights and other issues relating to them.

Still later in 1978, the State Department directed U.S. diplomatic missions in the area to seek further information on the possible use of poison gas against the Hmong.

In January 1979, the Department again informed the Lao Embassy of its concern about reports of the use of poison gas in Laos, coupling this with a similar demarche in Vientiane. The Lao denied the reports. At the same time we also notified the International Committee of the Red Cross of our concern.

In March, the U.S. representative to the 35th session of the U.N. Human Rights Commission expressed U.S. concern about the plight of the Hmong, specifically raising the issue of reported use of poison gas in Laos against this tribal minority.

In May a State Department representative went to refugee camps in Thailand to interview Hmong claiming to be eyewitnesses and/or victims of poison gas attacks in Laos. The State Department representative also visited Vientiane where he discussed the problem with various diplomatic missions and the senior UN representative in Laos. He raised the problem directly with the Lao Foreign Ministry, noting that he had been assigned to seek evidence of "gas" use from among Hmong refugees in Thailand. Working with another officer from the American Consulate in Udorn Thailand, he completed a report in June based on over 20 interviews with Hmong who claimed to be eyewitnesses and/or victims. The report concluded that based on these interviews, there was reason to believe that some chemical agent was being employed in Laos. Also, during this mission, the two State Department representatives received from Hmong refugees two samples of material that the Hmong claimed to be "poison gas residue" collected at the sites of two attacks in Laos. We have already heard from the medical people about the difficulties here.

We have provided these reports and our conclusions from these investigations to the Lao Government to substantiate and underscore our concern. We have also made demarches to the Vietnamese and Soviets and provided them with these June interview reports, urging that the Soviets use their influence with both Hanoi and Vientiane to raise the matter with their allies. The Vietnamese and the Lao, have categorically rejected reports of the use of such gas. The Soviets have stood behind these assertions. We have also provided information developed in these reports to other governments, asking each to share with us any available information they may have. Thus far, none have come forward with additional evidence.

In late-September of this year, an Army medical team was dispatched to Thailand to interview Hmong who claimed to have knowledge of gas attacks in Laos. The team interviewed over 40 eyewitnesses and produced a report which reinforced the findings of the June investigation and elaborated in greater detail the symptomology of the alleged victims. Dr. Lewis has discussed his findings in detail. I can assure you that we will very strongly raise Dr. Lewis's findings with various governments in a manner similar to our demarches based on the June report.

As recently as October 4, Assistant Secretary Holbrooke met with Lao Acting Foreign Minister Khamphay Boupha in New York and expressed deep U.S. concern about reports that poison gas was being used in Laos. The Lao, as in the past, rejected the allegations.

As Chairman Wolff has noted, we have received no reports of the use of "poison gas" in Laos later than June 1979, providing some hope that, whatever may have been taking place before that time

has since ceased. However, there have been a few reports recently from Khmer refugees and from Khmer resistance groups that Vietnamese forces seeking to consolidate control in Kampuchea are using lethal chemical agents.

In late 1978, we had noted isolated allegations by the Pol Pot Government, at that time still in control of the country, that Vietnamese troops were using "poison gas" delivered by artillery fire in eastern Kampuchea. Following the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Kampuchea, these allegations began to multiply as did refugee reports of apparent gas attacks that were in some instances lethal. While we obviously cannot accept Pol Pot allegations at face value, we are concerned by and investigating refugee reports.

We do not have the volume of reporting from Kampuchea at this time that we have seen from Laos. We are, however monitoring developments related to reports of gas use in Kampuchea very closely. We note that in Kampuchea, Vietnamese forces, and their allies, face a guerilla resistance, often based in rugged and relatively inaccessible terrain, much as they do in Laos. In our demarches to the Vietnamese and Soviets, mentioned above, we made it clear that our concern about these reports related to all of Indochina.

In sum, Mr. Chairman, on the basis of very sketchy reports of gas use in Laos, over a year ago, we acted to expand our knowledge on the question. Operating on the basis that the mounting numbers of reports, give them collective weight, and on our conviction that, given their subject matter warranted our deep concern, we have also for over a year used diplomatic channels to draw them to the

...tion of those with influence in Hanoi and Vietnam. In the case of Laos, we expressed our concern well in advance of the availability of significant evidence. We note the absence of any "gas" reports by refugees from Laos in over six months. We will of course continue to monitor the situation very closely.

In Kampuchea, while we do not have the weight of refugee testimony that we have had in the case of Laos, the similarity of the terrain and the nature of the fighting suggests that Vietnamese might possibly choose to rely on lethal chemical agents, if they have not already begun to do so, as some reports indicate.

We will continue to scrutinize developments in Kampuchea and are prepared to use diplomatic and public pressure on the Vietnamese should we develop additional information pointing to possible "gas" use in Kampuchea.