

Dioxin Traces Found Near U.S. Base in South Korea

By Mark McDonald

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SEOUL, South Korea — Trace amounts of dioxin have been found in water samples taken near an American Army base in South Korea, according to a joint investigation into possible chemical dumping that analysts said could have repercussions for the alliance between South Korea and the United States.

The discovery of dioxin, a toxic chemical linked to an array of maladies, near Camp Carroll, in southeastern South Korea, was part of an initial report on water and soil tests being conducted by both countries.

The dioxin was found in three streams near Camp Carroll, investigators said Thursday, and all the samples were well within safe drinking standards set by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Tests of three other streams and 10 wells were negative for dioxin.

Dioxin, a component of the powerful defoliant Agent Orange, has been linked to an array of maladies, including cancer, heart disease and birth defects. Agent Orange was widely used during the Vietnam War to expose the hiding places of enemy soldiers in jungles, swamps and forests.

A Pentagon official played down the initial findings of the investigation. “The trace of dioxin was negligible and appears to pose no health risk,” the official said, adding that no indications of Agent Orange were found.



Technicians tested for toxic chemicals near Camp Carroll in South Korea. Pool photo by Jung Yeon-je/Reuters

Military officials in Seoul said that Agent Orange also was sprayed along the heavily fortified border between North and South Korea in 1968. The spraying lasted about two months, they said, until local supplies of the herbicide were exhausted.

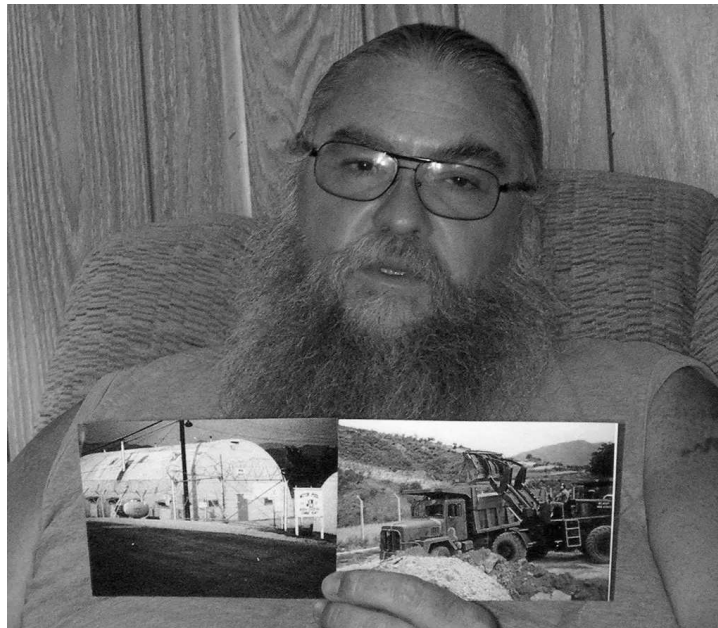
Political analysts said they had been encouraged by an unusually high level of cooperation between American and Korean military investigators, in part because the collaboration could defuse anger among those in South Korea who resent the American military presence here. About 28,500 American service members, primarily Army troops, are currently based in South Korea.

“There has been no delay in conducting investigations of the allegations and in extending full cooperation to the Korean government,” said Evans Revere, the former No. 2 diplomat at the American Embassy in Seoul who is now a lecturer and diplomat in residence at Princeton University.

“Transparency is really important here,” Mr. Revere said, “because of the need to deal with the inevitable conspiracy theories that will arise in the Korean media and among the political opposition.”

But Mr. Revere, a longtime American diplomat in Asia, said the Agent Orange issue was a delicate one and had the “potential to have a significant impact on popular attitudes toward the U.S.-South Korea alliance.”

Three former American soldiers — Steven House, Richard Cramer and Robert Travis — recently said they had helped to bury about 250 drums of waste at Camp Carroll in 1978. Their allegations were first broadcast by KPHO, a television station in Phoenix.



Steven House, a former American soldier, said he helped bury toxic waste near Camp Carroll in South Korea in 1978. Yonhap/European Pressphoto Agency

The men said the disposal site was a deep trench near a helicopter pad at Camp Carroll. The ditch was about 100 yards long and wide enough to accommodate a dump truck, they said.

Mr. Travis said the 55-gallon drums were olive-drab green, marked with a stripe and labeled “chemical type — Agent Orange.” He said some of the barrels were “dated 1967 for the Republic of Vietnam.”

The United States Army has acknowledged that pesticides, herbicides and other toxic compounds were buried at Camp Carroll, but the chemicals and about 60 tons of contaminated soil were later dug up and removed. An American military spokesman in Seoul, Lt. Col. Jeffrey S. Buczkowski, said the Army was still searching its records to discover what became of the excavated chemicals and soil.

Investigators said Thursday that they could not link the discovery of the dioxin to the chemicals buried in 1978. Meanwhile, the South Korean military is conducting environmental tests at 85 former American bases that have been returned to South Korean control.

The commander of American forces in South Korea, Lt. Gen. John D. Johnson, held a meeting two weeks ago with South Korean residents who live or work near Camp Carroll.

“I pledge that I will do everything necessary to determine the truth,” General Johnson said at the meeting. “My focus is to ensure there is no risk to the health of the people on Camp Carroll or off Camp Carroll. And if there is, I’ll fix it.”



Although the investigation looking into suspicions of chemical dumping is not yet complete, some analysts saw little chance that public anger here would reach the level that caused hundreds of thousands of Koreans to take to the streets in the summer of 2008 to protest — sometimes violently — the lifting of a ban on imports of American beef. The ban was first imposed in 2003 after a case of mad cow disease was detected in the United States.

The 2008 demonstrations, while ignited by the beef controversy, were also deeply tied to widespread frustrations over the early policies of President Lee Myung-bak, who took office in February 2008.

“The beef issue was more about Lee Myung-bak and his leadership style,” Mr. Revere said, “and the beef scare provided a convenient pretext to bash him.”

The fact that Camp Carroll is well to the southeast of Seoul may also dampen any nationwide outrage, said Lim Seong-ho, a professor of political science at Kyung Hee University in Seoul.

“The chemical danger is far away from most citizens,” Mr. Lim said. “Certainly, some groups and people will try to reignite anti-American sentiment. But the chemical dumping is restricted to a small part of a remote area and does not bring a terrible sense of danger to the mind of the Korean public.”

Some analysts saw possible comparisons between the Agent Orange issue and an episode in 2002, when an American armored vehicle killed two 14-year-old Korean girls walking to a birthday party. The accident stirred local opposition to the 37,000 American service members then stationed in South Korea. The subsequent acquittal of two American sergeants by a United States military panel outraged Koreans.

At the time, Mr. Revere said, the South Korean government failed to “defend the alliance” against news media speculations and “well-organized anti-American elements who sought to exploit the tragedy for political ends.”