

2007 Post

Global Pesticide?

Board: Agent Orange likely was used in Okinawa

Manilla..The U.S. Board of Veterans Appeals found in 1998 that the hazardous chemical defoliant Agent Orange was most likely used in Okinawa, and ruled in favor of a former U.S. service member who sought compensation for prostate cancer he blamed on his work there in the early 1960s, according to a board ruling uncovered by Kyodo News.

The discovery comes as the Defense Department has still to confirm whether Agent Orange was stored or used in Okinawa during the Vietnam War that ended in 1975.

In its ruling, issued on Jan. 13, 1998, the board concluded that credible evidence sustains a reasonable probability that the veteran was exposed to dioxins while serving in Okinawa.

The board further said it was granting him service-connected disability compensation for prostate cancer as being the result of Agent Orange exposure while in Okinawa between 1960 and 1961.

It found entirely believable his testimony about the U.S. militarys mixing, storage and even use of Agent Orange in Okinawa at a time when Japans southernmost prefecture was still under the control of the United States, which used it as a strategic transport hub during the Vietnam War.

Agent Orange, a herbicide mixture containing the highly toxic substance dioxin, was sprayed by U.S. military aircraft over the southern portion of Vietnam from 1961 to 1971 to clear jungles and deny cover to communist fighters.

It has since been blamed for numerous health problems, including various types of cancer and birth defects.

The former service member, who worked as a motor transport operator on Okinawa Island but had never been to Vietnam, said in his testimony that while Agent Orange was mainly used to defoliate trees and shrubbery in lush war zones like Vietnam, in Okinawa, we had other uses for it, particularly near base camp perimeters.

He said herbicides thought to include Agent Orange were sprayed from trucks or backpacks along roadsides, used for landscaping and also taken to the densely forested northern part of Okinawa Island to clear foliage to facilitate war game maneuvers there.

Subtropical Okinawas heavy rainfall, he said, created a demand for non-water-soluble defoliants such as Agent Orange that would not just wash away with the next rain. The thing that bothers me the most is that we were not told or warned about the hazards of the herbicides that we were handling, nor were we issued any protective clothing, he testified.

As recently as November 2004, the Defense Department stated that it has been unable to find any records of Agent Orange being used or stored on Okinawa Island during the Vietnam War era.

The statement came in response to queries made in July 2004 by then U.S. Rep. Lane Evans, a ranking Democrat on the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs, who wrote to then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld requesting any information on the use or storage of Agent Orange on Okinawa.

I am particularly interested in ascertaining when and where Agent Orange and similar herbicides were stored on Okinawa and whether or not there was any usage of herbicides or reports of spillage from drum corrosion or any other event which potentially involved exposure of service members to these herbicides, he wrote, according to a copy of the letter.

That was replied to by Gen. Richard Myers, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who told Evans in November 2004 that records contain no information linking use or storage of Agent Orange or other herbicides in Okinawa.

Myers further said there was no record of any spills, accidental or otherwise, of Agent Orange. Therefore, there are no recorded occupational exposures of service members in Okinawa to Agent Orange or similar herbicides.

The Board of Veterans Appeals ruling said that while the U.S military had been generally unable to document the use of herbicides in Okinawa, experts who attempted to verify specific dioxin exposure there do not negate that possibility.

The former service member, it said, was indeed where he said he was, at a time when military build-up from a support standpoint was considerable, doing a job which was entirely consistent with the mixing and other transport of herbicides, and at a time when these were both used and warnings not necessarily given, as he stated, since the hazards were not fully understood.

Hundreds more former U.S. service members who were stationed in Okinawa during the Vietnam War have lodged medical compensation claims with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, citing Agent Orange exposure, according to information viewable online in the archives of the Board of Veterans Appeals.

But most cases have either been denied or sent for review on the grounds of insufficient evidence linking their illnesses to Agent Orange exposure.

The various documents surface at a time when Washington and Tokyo are realigning the U.S. military presence in Japan following years of protests from Okinawans who have long complained about crime, noise and crowding associated with U.S. bases on the island since the end of World War II in 1945.

U.S. bases occupy about 20 percent of Okinawa's land area and have also been viewed as being a large part of the island's environmental problems.

In 1969, a leak of the deadly nerve agent VX on Okinawa injured 23 U.S. service members and one American civilian, sparking a furor among Japanese as the chemical weapons had been kept secret from Japan. They were subsequently removed.

Under the realignment, about 4,000 hectares of the 7,800-hectare U.S. jungle warfare training area in northern Okinawa, mentioned as a place where Agent Orange was sprayed, are due to be handed back to Japan.

Kunitoshi Sakurai, president of Okinawa University who specializes in environmental engineering, expressed concern over the possibility of residual dioxin there, pointing out that the northern area is the source of most of Okinawa's water supply.

Dioxin, Sakurai noted, does not dissolve in nature and would still be present even more than 40 years after use of Agent Orange.

The Okinawa government does not know whether Agent Orange was used in the base, he said, lamenting, It's difficult to know what is going on inside a military base.