Nerve Gas in Afghanistan?

The Administration has not corroborated its charge that the Soviets used illegal chemical weapons

Where enemies are concerned, it is easy to believe the worst. So it is not remarkable that the U.S. press has given wide play to reports that the Soviets have used gas, including deadly nerve gas, to kill rebel mountain people in Afghanistan. What is noteworthy is that top Administration officials have lent credence to these reports, even though they appear to have only circumstantial evidence to support the charges.

There is a risk in using official channels to spread speculative information, arms control experts have said recently, if the United States is genuinely interested in reaching an agreement with the Soviet Union to control the manufacture and deployment of chemical weapons. Negotiations to achieve such a pact are now in progress in Geneva. (A Biological Weapons Convention prohibiting the use of biological agents in war was agreed on in 1972.)

If the Soviets conclude that their U.S. counterparts in the chemical weapons business are more interested in scoring propaganda victories than in resolving the technical issues, they may withdraw from serious bargaining, even though the diplomats may continue to meet and talk. If the talks founder, it is said, cynicism will increase, creating an atmosphere in which using such weapons will seem more acceptable.

Disarmament officials also say, of course, that the Soviet's use of outlawed weapons like nerve gas should be publicized—if such use has actually occurred. Chemical weapons specialists are poring over the little evidence that is available right now to try to reach a definite conclusion on this point. Thus, the chemical weapons talks are threatened by the same suspicion that has stalled the strategic weapons treaty—a fear that the Soviets cheat on international commitments.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown stirred this fear anew in a speech on 7 April in Los Angeles. Referring to "the harsh facts of life about Afghanistan today," Brown said, "There is mounting evidence that the Soviets are using incapacitating gas—and some reports that they may be using lethal gas—in the Afghan countryside." The Geneva Protocol of 1925, which the major nations, including the United States and the Soviet Union (but not Afghanistan), have signed, prohibits the first use of asphyxiating, poisonous, or lethal gases in war. The United States accepts the common interpretation that the treaty does not prohibit the use of "crowd control agents," or irritants such as tear gas, used by U.S. forces in Vietnam.

> Matthew Meselson, chemical warfare expert at Harvard: "The evidence in the Afghan case is extremely poor."

The basis for Brown's charge lies in a file of eyewitness accounts taken from Afghan refugees who apparently lived to tell their tale. The file is being kept secret to protect sources. One reliable specialist who has been studying the evidence says it contains about a dozen personal accounts. According to a spokesman for the President's National Security Council, "nobody's got a cannister or a corpse" to provide physical corroboration of the refugees' stories. A CIA spokesman said, "There is no firm scientific evidence that they used lethal gas. It's quite understandable that they are using non-lethal crowd control agents . . . but we're still looking for hard evidence that they used lethal weapons." He would not say how many eyewitness accounts have been gathered.

On 24 April, the subcommittee on Asian and Pacific affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee held hearings to look into the case against the Soviets. The Administration's chief witness, Matthew Nimetz, under secretary of state for security assistance, science, and technology, told a somewhat puzzled audience: "These reports from Afghan refugees in Pakistan and nationalist leaders have led us to conclude the chances are about even that lethal agents have or have not been used by Soviet forces in trying to suppress Afghan resistance." Representative Jonathan Bingham (D-N.Y.), confessing bewilderment, sought to know if this meant that half the evidence supported the thesis that the Soviets have used nerve gas and half contradicted it. The elucidation was less than clear. Nimetz explained that the experts' considered judgment is that "there is a 50-50 chance that a lethal agent has been used."

Another witness, Matthew Meselson, professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at Harvard University and a government consultant on chemical weapons, said he was concerned that clumsy handling of this issue could "erode confidence in our credibility" and possibly encourage others such as the Soviets "to make allegations of this nature carelessly or maliciously." The evidence in the Afghan case, he thinks, is "extremely poor." Meselson urged the subcommittee to recall the charges made against the United States during the Vietnam war, which he investigated himself. U.S. forces routinely saturated trouble spots in the countryside with a tear gas known as CS and with plant-killing chemicals known as Agent Orange and Agent White. Although these are not considered lethal weapons, wide circulation was given to reports from Vietnam that peasants were being killed by American gases. Like another investigator working for the National Academy of Sciences, Meselson concluded that these reports could not be substantiated. However, he was puzzled and remains disturbed by accounts given him by more than 60 Montagnards who insisted that friends or relatives had been killed by American chemical attacks. Their stories, he found later, even matched up chronologically with U.S. records of air strikes in their areas. His conclusion: Montagnards give less accurate accounts of their suffering

0036-8075/80/0530-1016$00.50/0

than other war victims, or else they are more vulnerable to tear gas. More generally, Meselson wanted to point out that, if the tables were turned, our own government probably would not bow in humiliation before accusations made by a handful of mountain tribesmen and passed along to the world by the Soviet minister of defense.

There is a much stronger case, the Administration says, that lethal chemicals may have been used by Communist forces against primitive tribes in Laos. The eyewitness accounts are more numerous and more compelling. In addition, U.S. intelligence has confirmed earlier reports that a high-ranking Soviet commander of chemical forces was seen visiting Laos last year. But there is still no hard evidence that anyone was killed by lethal gas, or that the gas was Soviet supplied. The case is complicated by the fact that it is possible, Nimetz concedes, that some of the nonlethal chemicals used against guerilla tribesmen in Laos may have come from U.S. stocks captured in Vietnam. An Army report based on refugee accounts and filed last fall concludes that 700 to 1000 people may have been killed in chemical attacks, and that the chemicals used may have contained some unspecified nerve agent.

The United States in February asked the United Nations Human Rights Commission to investigate the reports of chemical attacks in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia. So far, nothing has happened. An assistant director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Thomas Davies, recently told Congress that, "There is no ready mechanism which can be quickly and effectively energized to investigate reports that chemical weapons are being employed, so as to serve as a deterrent." Evidence, which must be gathered quickly, may be lost. Because there is no standing committee enforcing the rules, each alleged violation of the Geneva Protocol becomes a political contest. "We recognize," Davies said, "that . . . it may be difficult to gain broad support for an investigation. Many countries, including some friendly to us, may suspect that our principal motivation is to embarrass our adversaries; this is not the case. Some may consider our approach hypocritical in view of the U.S. use of riot control agents and herbicides in Vietnam." The State Department is considering taking the whole issue before the U.N. General Assembly this fall.

The U.S.-Soviet agreement on chemical disarmament, now in negotiation, would provide for an investigative body, Davies said. But the talks are stuck at the moment on the techniques to be used in verifying that old stocks have been destroyed and that new production facilities are not being built. It is a hard technical problem, one official said, because "any toothpaste factory could be a chemical weapons plant." Davies would not estimate when an agreement might be concluded.

Since 1969 the United States has refrained from adding new stocks to its already quite large reserve of nerve gas. No new chemical weapons have been produced, although the Army has been given the funds to design but not build a new weapons plant, which would produce a "second generation" of gas projectiles. These are called binary weapons, because they contain two cannisters of gas which are nonlethal while separate but combine on use to form a lethal agent. The binary design makes them less of a public health hazard than the cannisters now in storage.

Congress rejected requests from the Ford Administration to approve construction of the new weapons factory, and the Carter Administration has refused to seek funding largely on the grounds that it might disrupt disarmament talks. Now, as a result of the charges being made against the Soviets, there will be more pressure to go ahead with the Army's program.

Although Congress has not yet moved to increase funding for chemical weapons production, there is a new concern that the events in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia will revive an area of the arms race that has lain dormant for more than a decade.—ELIOT MARSHALL

America's NATO troops carry defensive chemical warfare equipment, as in this recent exercise at Aviano Air Base in Italy. But since the late 1960's, no offensive weapons have been developed. [DOD photo]