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commentary

from other pens...

Toxic problem lingers in former South Vietnam

By George Gedda

Associated Press Writer

HANOI, Vietnam — Things have gone well for the United States and Vietnam in recent years, but problems lurk just below the surface — in many areas, just few inches below ground.

In parts of the former South Vietnam, researchers have found the levels of dioxin, a highly toxic substance, to be present at a depth of 10 centimeters, just over four inches.

It's the residue of the U.S. military's massive defoliation of Vietnamese jungles during the Vietnam war.

The issue is being aired in discussions this week between Vietnamese officials and America's prominent Vietnam veteran, Colin Powell.

He is making his first visit here since he came as an Army major in 1968, the height of the Vietnam War. Mayhem is not on Powell's agenda this time. He is coming in friendship, as secretary of state.

The lingering herbicides, most notably Agent Orange, were sprayed over large swaths of the territory of the former South Vietnam. The goal was to kill vegetation that might conceal or feed communist rebels from the south or allied troops from what was then North Vietnam.

As the Vietnamese see it, the herbicides have led to a proliferation of birth defects, miscarriages and other complications among the people.

They see an obvious connection because, they say, the maladies are most prevalent in areas where the spraying took place.

Powell is not ready to concede the point. Asked about effects of the herbicides, Powell said Monday while crossing the Pacific conclusions can be drawn only if a joint scientific inquiry examines the question.

Powell's units, as he acknowledges, sprayed some of the herbicides. He wrote that the destruction of crops may seem chilling today. But, he said, "As a young officer, I had been conditioned to believe in the wisdom of my superiors, and to obey."

He said the policy seemed to make sense because the Viet Cong guerrillas were supported by the North Vietnamese who, in turn, were backed by Beijing and Moscow — "both mortal enemies in the global struggle between freedom and communism."

Vietnam won the war but is more of a partner with its neighbors than an on-the-march communist menace these days. Capitalist countries are represented here in abundance — Japan, South Korea, not to mention the Powell-led United States, the erstwhile No. 1 enemy.

But the herbicide problem won't go away. Successive American administrations virtually ignored the issue until Vietnam agreed in 1995 to drop its demand for war reparations.

With reparations no longer clouding U.S.-Vietnamese relations, the United States is more amenable to joint scientific research.

And, indeed, the U.S. Embassy said this month the two countries reached an agreement to work together to study possible effects of Agent Orange and other herbicides.

Many American servicemen are believed to have been harmed by exposure to the herbicides. For 20 years, what is now the Department of Veterans Affairs has offered medical care to Vietnam veterans with health problems that may have resulted from herbicide use in Vietnam. The VA estimates that 2.6 million U.S. personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam and in adjacent waters during the war.

The Vietnam Veterans of America strongly supports research into the impact of herbicide use in Vietnam. Rick Weidman, VVA's director of government relations, wonders whether herbicide-related ailments can be passed on to ensuing generations.

"Vietnam veterans are concerned about our children and children's children," he says.

And, he says, since Vietnamese tend to marry younger than Americans, answers about the generational impact should be available more quickly in Vietnam than in the United States.

EDITOR'S NOTE — George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for the Associated Press since 1968.



Peace in the Middle East takes three words

What are 600 lives worth? What are three words worth? Numbers in and of themselves seem to lack any meaning. I think it's easier to put numbers in context. We use numbers as adjectives, to describe things. For example: \$600 dollars, 600 books, 600 years and 600 deaths.

The continued upheaval in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, gives the number 600 a personality of its own — 600 years or more of violence between Arabs and Jews, more than 600 people killed in this conflict just since a new holy war was declared by Palestinian groups almost 12 months ago.

The question the Bush Administration, and past administrations, are afraid to ask and honestly answer is: Can there ever be a real, lasting peace between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East? The United States government is afraid to acknowledge the cold, hard truth that peace in the Middle East is highly improbable, if not impossible. Six hundred words are not needed to solve the Arab and Jewish conflict that has killed far more than 600 people in the last 600 days. Only three words are needed, "We want peace."

But in 600 years no lasting peace has been achieved, and it is not possible in three words, 600 words, or 600 million words. Peace is not possible, and will not happen in my lifetime if I live to be 600 years old. The only thing we can do as Americans is try to decrease the amount of violence — we have no power to stop the violence. We are powerless to stop the violence just as the Arabs and Jews in the Middle East are powerless to stop it. All they need is three words.

The United States has no plan to alter the current situation in any meaningful way. It is the same old song and dance that has been going on for centuries in this region of the world.

"Seven days of quiet," is what Secretary of State



mitch hixson

• soundgarden

Colin Powell said will show that both sides are ready for peace. This test period of calm was brokered by Powell last week as a starting point for a U.S. led truce-to-peace-making plan. According to the truce plan, the seven days of quiet are to be followed by a six-week cooling off period.

The problem with this simplistic thinking is when was the last time this happened? In total, that is 49 days of peace and quiet in a region that hasn't seen that much silence in 600 years. The United States helped organize the Mitchell Commission led by former Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell. The proposals made by this commission are intended to help restore security by stopping the new "infintada" — holy war — and prevent the conflict from spreading by trying to lower tensions; the United States is pushing a policy of patience, not peace.

The U.S. is definitely more interested in regional stability than in actually advancing a policy of peace that has been proven over the course of history to be destined for failure, regardless the conditions set forth in any peace treaty. The laws of nature in the Middle East are different than the laws of nature here in America. So any American attempt to sell their current policy as a "peace" plan is a complete fraud.

I hope the Bush administration has finally come to the realization the Middle East peace process is a minefield that has no map. The United States cannot solve the cultural problems in the Middle East that breed violence between Jews and Arabs. It is a battle no one will ever win.

The current administration's simplistic view of world events is evident in the fact that they apparently believe the Mitchell Commission has the plan to achieve "patience" in the Middle East, they cannot believe this commission can achieve peace. Question: How many "commissions" have been organized in the last 600 years to achieve a peace in this region? How many have been successful in achieving this peace?

From my perspective, if the parties involved are still bound and determined to destroy the other, even after elongated "processes for peace," then we must render a verdict these previous commissions have failed.

Why does the administration believe the United States can solve a conflict that has lasted for hundreds of years, a conflict where the two sides cannot even agree when a "seven day quiet" period is supposed to start? How difficult is it to say that they want peace? Why doesn't the "quiet time" start now, today?

But no quiet time is in the cards. Both the Israelis and Palestinians have hammered their supporters into cookie cutters, hammered their enemies into rocks and teased the United States into thinking we can save the world. No peace process can even begin until a quiet period has occurred. Besides not even agreeing on when they're not supposed to try to kill each other, both sides have too much to lose if actual peace is achieved. A quiet period violation is a perfect excuse for self-defense. This is a perfect excuse to continue the violence.

The obstacles to peace are the same as have been present for centuries, the steps to overcome them are the same, and once again an American Administration thinks they have the answer. Sounds like deja vu all over again. Neither side really wants peace, so neither side gets it, and the United States is a convenient pawn used by both sides to give the illusion of peace could be at hand.

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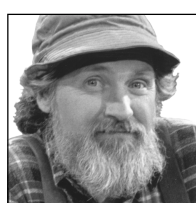
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Real men get heavy



red green

• north of forty

I was stuck in highway traffic the other day, which gave me time to watch the road construction. They had men there driving huge equipment: earth movers, graders, steam rollers — you get the idea. I couldn't help being envious. These are men in complete control of their environment. They sit on top of a 1,000-horsepower machine and change the world. A hill here, a valley there. And in a way, every time they build a road, they're telling the rest of us where to go. And we all bow down to them. All of the CEOs in their airline limos sit and wait while these guys stop traffic to turn around. These men are the real movers and shakers. Hollywood shows us images of what they think the ideal man should be: big muscles and an automatic weapon, creating havoc and carnage in his quest for peace, justice and the American way. To me, the real man has a beer gut and operates a piece of heavy equipment. In fact, the ideal man is a lot like heavy machinery: big, powerful, loud, and generally in the way.

RECYCLING FAILURE

I don't have any proof to support what I'm saying here. It's just a hunch. I think that every time a chemical company comes up with a product that doesn't work, rather than accept the financial loss, they turn it into a breakfast cereal or a sports drink. If it's insoluble in water or any known liquid, it ends up in a bowl with 8 ounces of milk. If it does dissolve in something, they make it red or green or blue and put a fancy nipple on the top. When you're in a grocery store and you see a new cereal made in the shape of sugarcoated nuclear weapons, or a new sports drink that comes in a robot-shaped bottle, there's a pretty good chance that something

went horribly wrong down at the lab. And the company knows there is minimal risk. The nutritional claims they make for the cereal are all based on the milk it's floating in, and anyone who buys a sports drink is probably healthy enough to survive it. Like I say, it's just a hunch.

MIDLIFE ZEN

In an effort to maintain, or at least prolong, your sanity, try this series of repetitive exercises designed specifically for the midlife male:

- Stare at the clouds as if you know something.
- Sit alone in the backyard.
- Never take your wallet when you're going to be around young women with cleavage.
- Take an hour a day to let your mind go blank. Some of you will be able to go longer.
- When you're in the bathroom, don't do anything in a hurry.
- Hug your wife at least four times a day. It'll confuse the hell out of her.

WHAT DID SHE SAY?

Have you ever wondered what the women say about us behind our backs? You know they talk about us because we talk about them. Maybe you think you'd like to be a fly on the wall and hear what she says about you, but I'm advising against it. If she says only nice things about you, you will feel obligated to live up to the compliments, and that

will ruin your life. If she says only bad things about you, you'll start sleeping with one eye open. If, on the other hand, she tells the truth — well, you know you don't want to hear that. No, the best thing is to just treat her private conversations as harmless steam escape valves that keep your marriage from blowing a gasket. The best relationships are built on trust, respect and ignorance.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "It is a historical fact that most wars are started by men without wives. Married men are smarter. They know they can't win." — Red Green

Red Green is the star of "The Red Green Show," a television series seen in the U.S. on PBS and in Canada on the CBC Network, and the author of "The Red Green Book" and "Red Green Talks Cars: A Love Story."

berry's world

HEY, BABY, COME HERE OFTEN?

YES— ABOUT ONCE EVERY TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS.



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