

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 30

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
22 June 1983

Yellow Rain: Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

By STEPHEN J. SOLARZ

There may be reasons for doubting that the Soviet Union is involved with illegal chemical warfare in Asia, but the facts of the case aren't among them. No matter how hard those who prefer to see and hear and speak no evil may try, the evidence simply cannot be explained away.

It is not just the United States but also Canada, Britain, Australia, China and Thailand, among others, which have found that illegal chemical warfare is being used in Asia. Even the Socialist foreign minister of France, who is no enemy of Vietnam, recently announced that France on its own had "firm and convincing evidence" of the use of these weapons in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan.

Yet it is easy to understand why so many good people resist this conclusion. When former Secretary of State Alexander Haig first aired the charge that the Soviet Union was violating treaties prohibiting chemical and biological warfare, his publicly presented evidence—a twig—seemed so thin that Mr. Haig's claim appeared to be more an exercise in Cold War propaganda than a presentation of carefully compiled scientific data. Many people here and abroad also worried that Mr. Haig's accusation was part of a Reagan administration attempt to justify its hostility to arms control agreements with the Soviet Union.

Plenty of Evidence

The initial skepticism which greeted Mr. Haig's accusation notwithstanding, the use of chemical warfare by the U.S.S.R. and Vietnam has now been established beyond doubt. Not only is there persuasive, if highly classified, technical data indicating Soviet involvement in the manufacture, supply and use of chemical weapons, but peer reviews of the U.S. evidence by a panel of American scientists and a leading Japanese authority on the subject have independently confirmed that the chemical agents discovered were indeed man-made, prohibited substances. In addition, there is publicly available medical testimony, hundreds of first-hand reports from the victims of "yellow rain," and laboratory analysis of samples taken from areas in which these prohibited toxins have been found.

Doctors from France, India, the U.S., the Philippines and Canada who work with refugees along the borders to which the victims of chemical warfare have fled almost uniformly report finding symptoms in victims of attacks which aren't consistent with any known disease, but which do conform to symptoms associated with illegal chemical weapons.

The stories of the victims are compelling in themselves. Contrary to what some doubters imply, these reports do not come from a handful of able-bodied, politically committed Meo leaders, but from a wide variety of Khmer, Hmong and Afghan refugees, ranging from little children to the elderly.

Their accounts of "yellow rain" attacks are particularly convincing in that they are usually not volunteered, but are revealed only when a doctor asks the refugees directly about their symptoms.

Refugee reports are dismissed by many people as inherently unreliable. This is exactly what happened when the first stories began to come out of Nazi-occupied Europe about the Holocaust. In fact refugees have a record of being excellent sources of information on inaccessible societies and situations.

The Chinese who fled to Hong Kong in 1962 carried reports of mass famine. Even experts dismissed their testimony. Yet it is now known that at least 10 million people perished.

Cambodian refugees fleeing Pol Pot's minions after the fall of the Lon Nol regime in 1975 related harrowing accounts of autogenocide. Many people dismissed the bloody truth as a Cold War lie invented to discredit Vietnam, which was seen as supporting Cambodia. Yet we now know that about a third of the Khmer people lost their lives during Pol Pot's brief period in power.

The reports of Afghan refugees fleeing Soviet tyranny and of Guatemalan refugees fleeing their own army, which has gone on a rampage in the countryside, are now widely accepted. It strains credulity to believe that the refugees escaping "yellow rain" in Asia, alone among all the victims of repression, are uniquely engaged in a monumental hoax.

For those not fully convinced by the testimony of independent doctors or the reports of victimized refugees, even more definitive proof is available in the form of laboratory analysis. Samples obtained from areas in which "yellow rain" has been reported reveal combinations of trichothecene toxins not found in nature. Since Hanoi doesn't have the scientific or technical capacity to manufacture these illegal substances, it is clear that Vietnam must be receiving them from the Soviet Union.

The only explanation of these man-made poisons that would exculpate the Soviet Union is that the CIA or some other foreign agency planted the evidence. But not even the U.S.S.R. has suggested such a conspiracy theory as a way of explaining the undeniable existence of these toxins.

In its formal response to the U.S. charges, the Soviet Union has acknowledged the existence in Laos and Cambodia of these prohibited chemicals. But it has claimed that they are due to U.S. use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, which, according to the Soviet argument, destroyed the natural vegetation and led to the growth of elephant grasses that produced the toxins in question. These deadly poisons, the Soviets go on to claim, are being carried into hostile Hmong and Khmer regions by monsoon winds that, somehow or other, deposit them nowhere else. So far not a single serious independent scientist, or even Rube Goldberg, has lent any credence to this Soviet invention of inherently implausible interrelations, and a UN team of experts found no validity in the Soviet hypothesis.

We Can't Ignore the Victims

The latest effort to explain away the damning evidence asserts that the trichothecenes found in Southeast Asia grew on bee defecations. Since bees have presumably long been indigenous to the region, it is odd that these deadly manifestations show up only now. The incredible bee hypothesis, unlike the one advanced by the Soviet Union, does not even pretend to explain why these poisonous substances did not appear in earlier years or in other places.

Some people resist the compelling evidence of Soviet violation of chemical and biological arms accords out of a fear that such a conclusion would jeopardize prospects for reaching future arms-control agreements. But the conclusion which the evidence compels is not that the U.S. should refrain from entering into such agreements with the Soviets, but that any such treaties must have adequate provisions for verification, in contrast to the chemical-war conventions which lack them.

Arms-limitation agreements with the Soviets are essential if we are going to bring the arms race under control. But it is absolutely imperative that, in the midst of such efforts, we don't turn our backs on another helpless group of victims. Otherwise the crime will spread. Reports are now coming in of similar chemical attacks in Eritrea. This outrage must end.

Mr. Solarz (D., N.Y.) is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs.