Gromko

JAN 21 1986

Department of External Affairs | Ministère des Affaires extérieures

Canada

OTTAWA, ONTARIO
K1A 0G2

IDA-0185

Jaunuary 14, 1986

Professor Matthew Meselson
Department of Biochemistry and
Molecular Biology
Harvard University
7 Divinity Avenue
Cambridge, Massachussetts, 02138
U.S.A.

Dear Professor Meselson:

Thank you very much for your letters of August 28 and December 11, 1985. I read with interest your article in Scientific American as well as the ensuing exchange of letters between yourself and Professor Mirocha. I have also read William Kucewicz's comments which appeared in the Wall Street Journal on September 6, 1985. Please excuse the delay in my response. I was attending the Third Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in Geneva through August and September and, since then, was fully occupied with the deluge of arms control and disarmament resolutions from the U.N. General Assembly.

I do not have the scientific background to make any useful contribution to the discussion from a technical nature. However, since I had been closely involved in the Canadian investigations into the allegations of chemical weapon use in Southeast Asia, I do have several general observations on the issue. I must stress, however, that these are my personal views. During my three and a half years in the region, I spent a great deal of time both interviewing Indochinese refugees for immigration purposes and reporting on Cambodian border relief operations.

Among other things, I was specifically responsible for the immigration processing of the Hmong, Yao and Meo hill tribe people and consequently spent a good deal of my time in the various northern hill tribe refugee camps along the Laotian border. On the Cambodian border, my work brought me into close

.../2

and frequent contact with Prince Sihanouk's Moulinaka, San Sann's Khmer Peoples' National Liberation Front and the Khmer Rouge. Since I had spent twelve years in the Canadian Army as an artillery officer, I was naturally very interested in the military situation both in Laos and Cambodia. It was always interesting to wake up at dawn to the sound of a Vietnamese artillery barrage.

When I first began to hear stories of chemical weapons use, I was frankly sceptical. Initially many of the stories referred not to yellow rain but to a variety of coloured smoke. To this trained forward air controller it sounded initially more like a question of the use of coloured smoke for target indication to attacking aircraft than the use of chemical weapons. It is for this reason that I spent a great deal of time cross-examining various witnesses, including resistance fighters, to determine whether the tactical situation and the actual course of battle necessitated the use of coloured smoke. I concluded that the attacks on Hmong villages were not sophisticated affairs requiring any high degree of coordination. They certainly did not require the use of coloured smoke for target indication.

As an aside, I should add that during my first two years in Southeast Asia I spent a total of 45 weeks in the various camps interviewing refugees. Because many of these people wanted to be resettled overseas at any cost, there were a certain number of fraudulent claims, particularly by those people who had something to hide about their past. I soon felt very confident in my interviewing and cross-examination techniques to catch out most people who attempted to lie to me. I was certainly not a naive dilettante merely on a brief visit to Thailand. I also had a network of reliable interpreters. In the case of the Hmong in Ban Vinai, I relied mostly on interpreters from the hospital rather than those supplied by the camp authorities. The hospital interpreters, by the way, were also much better in dealing with the various medical symptoms.

What finally convinced me of the veracity of Hmong stories about chemical attacks were my interviews of women, children and older people, who were not connected with the resistance movement and who were not interested in settlement. That is, they had no possible ulterior motives to lie; nor did their stories change under lengthy cross-examination.

As you well know, the Hmong, whether pro- or anti-communist, have a long history of resisting the authority of the central Lao government no matter what its politics. The

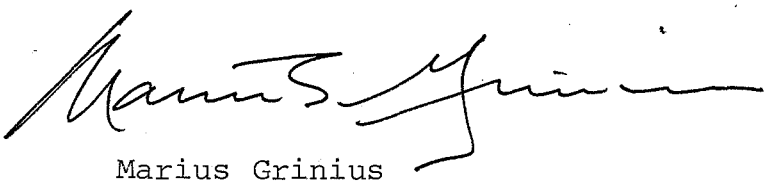
.../3

Hmong have existed in their semi-nomadic lifestyle for literally centuries. It appears to be the policy of the present Vietiane regime to force the remaining Hmong to resettle in the valleys where they can be better controlled. The Lao army has not been above using force to implement this policy.

The fighting along the Cambodian border has been of a totally different nature and the question of the use of lethal chemical agents is more ambiguous. Certainly, water supplies were often poisoned. It should be noted that Khmer Rouge soldiers were known to break ranks and flee at the sight of non-lethal white smoke. It would appear that the Vietnamese took advantage of these Khmer fears by using ordinary artillery and mortar white smoke rounds. But surely there must have been some basis for these fears. It should also be noted that a number of gas masks were captured from Vietnamese soldiers. As an ex-soldier, I would find it bizarre for the Vietnamese to carry any extra equipment, particularly when fighting in the jungle, if it were not necessary. Certainly, the Khmer Rouge had no chemical weapon capability. So why did the Vietnamese carry gas masks? Unfortunately, these are only clues which fall short of the necessary concrete evidence.

I remain convinced that some type or types of lethal chemical agents were used against the Hmong whether as a possible experiment or as part of a deliberate military operation. It would appear that at least non-lethal chemical agents were used on the Cambodian border. While it would be nice to settle definitively whether mycotoxins were ever used in the region, I regret that this controversy has degenerated into an esoteric laboratory debate which has obscured and trivialized the greater tragedy of the Hmong people.

Yours sincerely,



Marius Grinius
Arms Control &
Disarmament Division