

WEED KILLERS AID WAR ON VIETCONG

They Are Used to Destroy Reds' Shelter and Crops

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WASHINGTON, March 27—Weed killers are among the weapons being used against Communist guerrillas in what Secretary of State Dean Rusk has labeled the "mean, dirty struggle" in South Vietnam.

The weed killers, such as are used in many American gardens, are employed to strip jungle areas of foliage to expose Vietcong insurgents and to deprive them of possible ambush sites.

They are also used to damage farm crops in areas where Vietcong control has long been established.

United States military forces, while participating in most of the defoliating efforts, have not taken part in crop-damaging operations.

Defoliation operations have been carried on in South Vietnam since 1961.

Military officials say that just as tear and nausea gases are commonplace police weapons, the weed killers are ordinary chemical compounds. The compounds — known as 2,4-D, 2,5-T and 4,5-T—are variations of dichlorophenoxyacetic acid and trichlorophenoxyacetic acid and are available on the commercial market.

Widely Used in U.S.

The "D" compound kills herbaceous, or soft-stemmed, plants. The "T" compounds kill woody plants. They may be used in combination and are often used in the United States to control weeds along roadsides and to combat ragweed and poison ivy.

Depending upon the mixture and concentration, however, these chemical compounds may be used to destroy many kinds of plant life. Military officials emphasize, however, that they are not harmful to people, animals, soil or water.

In South Vietnam, the officials say, the defoliants have been used "under controlled conditions for unquestionably legitimate requirements."

United States Air Force crews have flown two-engine C-123 cargo planes with internal chemical tanks that feed spray devices under the wings. The technique is similar to commercial crop dusting.

Similarly, the Army has occasionally put HU-1B helicopters at the disposal of South Vietnamese forces for defoliating actions.

The chemicals have been sprayed along roads and canals to destroy sheltering foliage that guerrillas might employ for ambushes. They are also used in the vicinity of headquarters buildings and around villages.

Until now, on the premise that the United States has not been engaged directly in the war against the Vietcong, United States planes have been kept out of crop-damage operations.

The South Vietnamese Air Force, however, has swooped on areas believed to be under cultivation by the Vietcong and has sprayed them with heavy defoliant concentrates.

Such operations have been a subject of controversy. Many

officials believe that they have been only partly successful. They cite occasional errors, in which crops grown by loyal South Vietnamese civilians have been ruined.

Moreover, the operations are said to leave the United States open to charges of germ warfare, even if unjustified. The uproar over the use of riot-control gases is cited in support of this argument.