

U.S. Spray Planes Destroy Rice in Vietcong Territory

By CHARLES MOHR

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 20—United States Air Force planes, spraying chemicals, have undertaken a drive to destroy rice crops in some areas under Vietcong control.

The program uses the same chemicals as the "defoliation" program, which aims at destroying jungle canopy and undergrowth capable of sheltering guerrillas.

The defoliation program has gone on since 1961.

Officials describe the crop-destruction chemical as a commercial weed killer, identical with a popular brand that many Americans spray on their lawns. It is not poisonous, and officials say that any food that survives its deadening touch will not be toxic or unpalatable.

Crop destruction, or herbicide, is a politically delicate subject. Civilian officials have not publicized it, and Air Force officers say they are forbidden to discuss it.

Began Last Spring

There is a complex system of political and military controls on the crop-destruction program. The program, which began last spring, has touched only a small fraction—50,000 to 75,000 acres—of the more than eight million acres of cultivated land in South Vietnam. This is the intention of policy-makers.

Although the Vietcong control or at least contest 70 per cent of the land area of the nation, crop-destruction missions are aimed only at relatively small areas of major military importance where the guerrillas grow their own food or where the population is willingly committed to their cause.

Officials say that no herbicide missions have been flown or will be flown in heavily populated areas. There has been no crop destruction, for example, in the Mekong Delta, officials say.

There is concern that any attempt to destroy crops in heavily populated areas dominated by the Vietcong could only send a new flood of displaced Vietnamese to join South

Continued on Page 4, Column 3

U.S. DESTROYS RICE TO HURT VIETCONG

Continued From Page 1, Col. 6

Vietnam's 730,000 war refugees.

It is also suggested that unless the herbicide were applied on a vast scale, a move that would probably be politically impermissible, it could have little effect in heavily populated areas. "There is just so much food in the delta that crop-destruction missions here would have no real military value," one official said.

The Air Force transport planes that carry on both defoliation and herbicide are spending more than half their time on herbicide. The crop-destruction efforts are expected to grow next year.

Experience has shown that when the chemical is applied during the growing season, before rice and other food plants are ripe, it will destroy 60 to 90 per cent of the crop.

It is too early to be sure, but there are suggestions that the herbicide could be a powerful weapon against the Vietcong. As the size of Vietcong units has increased in sparsely inhabited jungle and mountain areas, so has the importance of guerrilla food-growing programs. Some Vietcong units are devoting as much as 50 per cent of their manpower to growing food, according to intelligence reports.

The Chain of Command

The political control of the crop-destruction program begins with the South Vietnamese. A province chief must approve and, at least technically, must request any spray mission.

His request is passed to Saigon's Joint General Staff, which passes it to the United States Military Assistance Command. After approval by the American command, each project must receive approval by a high officer of the United States Embassy.

In areas where such missions are likely to create refugees, plans must be made to receive and care for them.

Destruction operations are intended primarily for food fields in such Vietcong base areas as War Zone D, north of Saigon, and in areas where growers are considered willing Vietcong supporters.

Crop destruction is only one part of a large program of "food denial" to the Vietcong. The United States' 173d Airborne Brigade is conducting a "harvest protection" operation in Binh Tuy Province, where troops are holding off Vietcong rice collectors while peasants are required to sell their surpluses to the Government or to the commercial market.

Until this operation materialized, a plan to destroy the rice by spraying had been in the making.

Even "harvest protection" programs are politically dangerous. In some cases, the peasants have been unable to sell their rice. It has therefore been confiscated in exchange for certificates redeemable later. But the peasants mistrust the certificates.

Both United States and South Vietnamese troops often try to destroy supplies of harvested rice that they find in areas under the political control of the Vietcong. All such supplies are described in press communiqués as "VC rice caches," but officials concede that in some cases the troops have destroyed the

property of civilian peasants, who may well remain resentful when attempts are made later to gain their political loyalty.

Rice is not easy to destroy. Soldiers have found it one of the most maddeningly indestructible substances on earth. Even with thermite molten-metal grenades, it virtually will not burn. The scattering of rice does not prevent its collection by patient men.

Some units have been asked to undertake an experiment in making such rice caches unpalatable without poisoning the food. Their instructions are to put it in a hole—"if we can find one," an American officer grumbled—and to cover it with a mixture of water, harmless yellow dye and shark repellent.