

U.S. Tells of Crop Destruction in South Vietnam

WASHINGTON, March 9 (UPI)—The State Department said today that about 20,000 acres of South Vietnamese crops had been destroyed with herbicides to deny food to the guerrillas.

It said this was one-third of 1 per cent of the land under cultivation in South Vietnam.

The figure does not include jungle and underbrush that has been defoliated, or treated with chemicals so the leaves fall off, to deny cover to the guerrilla forces. Officials said they could not estimate the defoliated acreage.

The State Department made public the most complete explanation so far on defoliation and crop-destruction programs in Vietnam, including their purposes and safeguards.

Used Along Roads

"Defoliation has been used to deprive Communist guerrillas where possible of cover and concealment," the department said. "It is used along roads, railroads and canals where the Vietcong have regularly taken advantage of thick foliage to set up ambushes against both military and civilian traffic.

"It is used against remote Vietcong base areas, where the Communists have used thick natural cover to conceal their heavily fortified training and regroupment centers."

The statement was issued after questions about the case of Robert B. Nichols, a 46-year-old New York landscape architect, who has gone on a hunger strike after writing a letter to President Johnson.

Mr. Nichols asked the Presi-

20,000 Acres Laid Waste Do Not Include Defoliation of Vietcong Hideouts

dent for an explanation why the United States was helping South Vietnam grow more food while at the same time destroying the crops.

Robert J. McCloskey, State Department press officer, said the White House staff had written Mr. Nichols a reply that the architect apparently did not find satisfactory.

"It is regrettable," Mr. McCloskey said, "that he has chosen to express that dissatisfaction by endangering his own health."

The State Department statement on crops said that "in some cases herbicides have been used to destroy crops in remote areas long occupied by the Vietcong."

"The areas affected are known to be used to produce food for Vietcong military units," it added. "In war, food is as essential to the effectiveness of a military unit as weapons and ammunition."

The areas involved in the crop-destruction program are remote and thinly populated, the department said.

"They are known from intelligence sources to be occu-

pled by Vietcong military units," the statement added.

"The herbicides used are nontoxic and not dangerous to man or animal life. The land is not affected for future use.

"The Vietcong and any innocent persons in the area are warned of the planned action. They are asked to leave the area. They are promised food and good treatment when they move out. Those who have moved from Vietcong territory for this reason have been fed and cared for."

The State Department said all defoliation and crop-destruction operations were initiated by the South Vietnamese themselves, usually by a district or province chief. It said United States aircraft and technical capability were used, but the South Vietnamese participated at every stage.

Architect's Fast in 11th Day

Mr. Nichols, the New York landscape architect, who went through his 11th day of fasting yesterday, said he would not comment on the State Department's announcement until he had read the text.

In a statement made public at Judson Memorial Church, 55 Washington Square South, where he is conducting his fast, Mr. Nichols said he would decide today "whether the information given was sufficient to relieve him of his commitment to fast."