The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Disposing of Japan's World War II Poison Gas in China

by Tsuneishi Keiichi

In addition to disposing of the weapons that have already been found, Japan is required to promptly find and destroy those whose whereabouts remain unknown.

In late September, the Tokyo District Court ruled in favor of Chinese plaintiffs demanding compensation for damages caused by chemical weapons left behind in China by the Imperial Japanese Army. Referring to the Japanese government's plans to dispose of the abandoned weapons, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda made the following comment the next day: "Since we don't know if we can complete (the disposal) at the current pace, we must think about expediting our plans." This is a welcome decision.

But how can the disposal process be hastened? For abandoned weapons that have already been discovered, it is possible to advance the pace of removal if Japan promptly implements the plans that have been agreed upon between the Japanese and Chinese governments in April. However, such a method is no more than a makeshift measure to dispose of the weapons as they are discovered. Instead, what Japan needs is to clean up the entire mess it left behind in China up to the end of World War II in 1945.

As the court ruling also demands, in addition to disposing of the weapons that have already been found, Japan is required to promptly find and destroy those whose whereabouts remain unknown.

How is that possible? In 1995, I accompanied a group of Diet members of the Social Democratic Party of Japan and visited Haerbaling in China's Jilin province, where an estimated 700,000 chemical shells are buried, to look into the local situation.

After the visit, I released a report in which I made a number of proposals. They include the following:

1. Japan should identify people who discarded chemical weapons before and after the war and interview them to find out the kinds of weapons they buried, their locations and any other details that would help find them.

2. Japan should find and disclose government documents that show information concerning the deployment of chemical weapons before and after its defeat in the war.

The report was submitted to then Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. International treaties officially recognize blistering agents such as mustard gas and lewisite as poison gases. Traditionally, Japan has maintained an ambiguous stance about its past use of such gases. In the report, I also indicated that in order to implement the first proposal, before anything else, the government must publicly recognize that it used them. Had the first proposal been implemented, it might have been able to prevent the recent poison gas incidents in Ibaraki Prefecture and Qiqihar in China's Heilongjiang province.

To see if there is anything I could do to put the 1995 proposals into practice, with the help of Seiya Matsuno, a Meiji University graduate student, in 2000, I looked into the records kept by the Defense Agency office of war history to find out how many chemical weapons had been sent overseas.

During the course of my research, I learned that the records are very limited.

Only those between fiscal 1937 and 1941 were available. According to them, during that time, a total of 839,956 chemical shells were shipped overseas. Of these, 571,946 were sent to China and the remaining 268,010 went to Southeast Asia.

Judging from the actual situation, it is natural to assume that a larger number of chemical weapons were sent overseas in fiscal 1942 and 1943. However, as no records were available for those years, I could not verify this point. I don't know whether the records are missing or being kept confidential.

If the latter is the case, they should be immediately declassified. If that is not possible, the government is urged to inquire into the situation and notify the results to relevant prefectures and countries.

Such surveys also provide basic data for an ongoing project of the Environment Ministry to look into domestically abandoned chemical weapons. Furthermore, the findings may prevent future harm by abandoned Japanese chemical weapons across Asia.

However, to find out more about chemical weapons that were dumped when Japan lost the war, it is necessary to hear the first-hand accounts of the people who actually did the dumping.

For that, the government needs to officially recognize its use of poison gas and extensively call on former military personnel to volunteer information. Doing so paves the way to provide useful information for a reinvestigation of domestically abandoned chemical weapons; prevent damage in Asian countries; and help restore Japan's international trust.

[The author is a Kanagawa University professor specializing in the history of science. He contributed this comment to the Asahi Shimbun.(IHT/Asahi: Nov. 1, 2003). See also an earlier comment on chemical weapons by the author.]