

Uzbekistan: Riddle of Chemical Weapons Claim

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Tashkent government plays down USA's alleged discovery of traces of deadly gases at an Uzbek air base.

The Uzbek government has dismissed American claims that traces of deadly nerve and mustard gases have been found at Khanabad air base.

And Russian military specialists have denied that any chemicals could have been left at the southern complex after Uzbekistan became independent 11 years ago.

Uzbek foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov told a June 17 press conference that speculation on the issue was "too extreme". He claimed that there was no danger and that the incident would not affect relations between Uzbekistan and the US, which is occupying the base during its operations in Afghanistan.

However, the government declined to go into further detail on the subject and the nature of the substances, and how they got there, remains a mystery.

A spokesman for the US military in Afghanistan said specialists had found traces of nerve and mustard gases in the base's hangar, headquarters and barracks.

But Marat Davrenov, an Uzbek military chemist and former Soviet army reserve colonel with more than 20 years' experience in developing anti-chemical weapon procedures, has challenged this story. "The chemicals could only have been found there if someone had brought them into the base and sprayed them at these sites," he said.

"They could not have remained since Soviet times. These substances evaporate and would have vanished completely after eleven years. Also, if there really had been chemical weapons at the base, the American soldiers would have been injured."

He told IWPR that even small doses of nerve gas could cause severe injury in a short period of time. The first symptoms include feelings of pressure in the chest, blood vessel spasms, weakness, nausea, nervous excitement, headaches and loss of sight.

According to American soldiers, all US personnel at the base have been given a clean bill of health after extensive check-ups.

Uzbekistan's Ustyurt plateau was used by the Soviets as a testing ground for anti-chemical weapons experiments, and Russia maintains that this was the only part of the country exposed to such gases.

The movement and storage of these chemicals was strictly controlled. Every milligram used had to be signed for - the remainder noted by a supervisor, who then put his signature to an official document.

Each day, the stock was checked and signed for by three different people. Any discrepancy was investigated and the loss of any item or substance was treated as a criminal offence.

Following the Soviet collapse, all samples and equipment were transferred back to Russia or destroyed on the spot. Sources have confirmed that flights to and from the Ustyurt testing area came from Kazakstan's Emba military aerodrome, so there would appear to be no connection with the base at Khanabad.

Uzbekistan is one of 160 countries to have signed a convention on banning development, storage or use of chemical weapons and the government claims to carry out these obligations strictly.

The USSR was well equipped against chemical attack, with dedicated defence regiments and laboratories, and every Soviet citizen was issued with a gas mask.

However, Uzbekistan's emergency ministry has refused to discuss its civil defence procedures in the event of a chemical weapons strike, or comment on the US allegations.

While both governments appear to be playing the incident down, the absence of an official statement from the Uzbek military and the vague nature of Kamilov's denial have left many more questions unanswered.

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