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Pentagon Removing Lethal Gas

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon, acknowledging for the first time that the United States has deployed war gases overseas, announced Tuesday it is removing its chemical weapons from Okinawa.

"Preparations are being made to remove certain chemical munitions, including some toxic agents, which were moved to Okinawa several years ago as a result of decisions made in 1961 and 1963," the Defense Department said.

The United States acted to defuse potential diplomatic problems with Japan four days after news reports said that 24 U.S. military and civilian personnel were affected when a container of nerve gas broke open at a U.S. base on Okinawa.

Until Tuesday, the Pentagon acknowledged only that there had been a mishap, and that the U.S. personnel had been returned to duty after brief medical observation.

The new announcement by Daniel Z. Henkin, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, gave a fuller account of the July 8 incident and disclosed that it involved a nerve gas called GB, described as a toxic, nonpersistent, quick-acting chemical nerve agent which can injure by inhalation or by penetrating the skin.

The Pentagon announcement took pains to stress that the chemical munitions were sent to Okinawa during the Kennedy administration and that "no toxic chemical agents have been deployed overseas since Secretary Melvin E. Laird took office" six months ago.

At the same time, Henkin refused to discuss whether the United States has positioned chemical and radiological weapons elsewhere overseas, but he did state "unequivocally that there are no U.S. biological weapons stored overseas."