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18 July 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Current Intelligence  
SUBJECT : Nerve Gas Incident on Okinawa

1. The front page article in the Wall Street Journal of 18 July was the first information received on the reported leakage last week of "VX nerve gas" at an unspecified US base on Okinawa. OCI inquiries for further information have been initiated with the NMCC, DIA, and State.

2. According to a late AP ticker from Tokyo, the Sato government has asked the US Embassy for information on the alleged incident. In Washington, the Department of Defense has acknowledged that 24 servicemen were indeed hospitalized as a result of an incident at a US base in Okinawa, but has shed no further light on the nature of the problem.

3. Whether or not the incident as related in the Journal is substantiated, its mere reporting seems certain to stir up anti-US sentiment on Okinawa and in Japan proper. While not certain of how this will go, we can subscribe to the article's predictions of Japanese leftist exploitation of this issue to the possible embarrassment of the US during President Nixon's Asian tour and the scheduled visit to Japan by Secretary Rogers late this month. Japanese and Okinawan media have not yet obtained information on the incident, but extensive coverage can be expected shortly.

4. The Japanese are no less sensitive than Americans to the terrifying aspects of chemical warfare agents, and probably are a good deal more so. With their well known "nuclear allergy" as

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a basis, the Japanese are easily aroused by scare reports of radioactive pollution of their waters, and of other "evils" associated with US bases in Japan and Okinawa, such as jet noises, danger of crashing planes and dropped objects, and contamination of local wells by seepage from gasoline storage tanks. These fears and irritants are always present among the Japanese, and are readily susceptible to exploitation by anti-US elements on the slightest pretext.

5. The Journal article mentioned a possible previous instance of CBW contamination on Okinawa last year. Our files reveal the following on that case:

On 21 July 1968, 237 Okinawans, mostly students, swimming near a US military installation at Gushikawa in east central Okinawa, were exposed to an unknown irritant which caused inflammation of the skin and eyes. The local press claimed the source of the ailment was a "chemical" defoliant" stored at Gushikawa for use by US forces in Vietnam. The actual source of the ailment was never officially identified. US authorities on Okinawa speculated that the irritant could be a) industrial waste; b) poisonous marine life; or c) rupture of discarded war gas cannisters on the ocean bottom.

6. That episode last year blew over without serious repercussions, largely due to the relative mildness of the affliction and the inability to pinpoint the cause. However, "nerve gas" is a more volatile issue, much in the news these days. Japanese leftists, moreover, are hurting for a good rallying cause in their lagging campaign against the Sato government's handling of the Okinawan and Mutual Security Treaty issues with the US. They may well be tempted to try to give this present incident a good propaganda ride.

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Chief, North Asia Branch

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