

Extra Feature Story

Gulf War Syndrome Is Real and Caused by Toxins, Report States

November 21, 2008

Seventeen years after the first Gulf War, a congressionally mandated panel released a report Nov. 17 that concluded an illness suffered by veterans exposed to certain toxins during the war is real. The government previously did not consider the illness a physical condition separate from shell shock or war stress.

The first Gulf War, also known as the Persian Gulf War, began in August 1990 when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein amassed troops in the south and then invaded its neighbor Kuwait. Soon after, the U.N. Security Council member states imposed sanctions, and the United States and United Kingdom prepared for war with Iraq.

U.S. President George H.W. Bush (father of 43rd President George W. Bush), backed by the United Nations, ordered the Iraqi Army to withdraw from Kuwait by Jan. 16 or face military action.

On Jan. 17, a coalition of 34 nations launched a major air and land campaign that lasted six weeks. Much of Iraq's military and civilian infrastructure was destroyed, and Iraq withdrew from Kuwait in February 1991.

Rather than ousting Saddam, the United States encouraged Iraqis to rise up against their leader. Despite an attempted coup d'etat in the north, Saddam remained in power until he was toppled in 2003 by coalition forces during the Iraq war.

Gulf War Illness

While the war was widely considered a success in the United States for its speed and relatively small death toll, many returning veterans complained of a wide range of health problems. Complaints typically included persistent memory and concentration problems, chronic headaches, widespread pain, gastrointestinal problems and other chronic abnormalities.

On Nov. 17, the Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses released findings that the symptoms were caused by exposure to chemical toxins during the war.

Nearly one quarter of returning troops -- more than 175,000 veterans -- suffer from the illness.

Almost none of the veterans have improved in the 17 years since the armed conflict, committee Chairman James Binns told the NewsHour. The committee found that only "8 percent in this large study said that they had some improvement, but 15 percent were worse," he said.

Causes of the illness

The illness was caused by two toxic exposures either working together or by themselves: the ingestion of pyridostigmine bromide, PB pills -- which were provided to the troops to protect against nerve gas attack-- and pesticides, which were used to protect the troops from disease-carrying insects, according to the report.

While the Food and Drug Administration never approved the use of the PB pills, the federal agency waived informed consent to the Department of Defense because of the circumstances surrounding their use.

The report did not rule out gasses from smoking oil fields, depleted uranium munitions and anthrax vaccines as other causes of the illness, but said the evidence pointed to the pills and pesticides.

The Persian Gulf War was not the first time that U.S. soldiers have been exposed to toxins during war. Vietnam War veterans fought for many years to have the Pentagon recognize that their post-war illnesses were due to exposure to Agent Orange, a chemical used to remove trees and bushes from the battlefield.

'Bittersweet victory'

Anthony Hardie, a Gulf War veteran and member of the committee, called the report "huge" but also "a bittersweet victory, [because] this is what Gulf War veterans have been saying all along. Years were squandered by the federal government ... trying to disprove that anything could be wrong with Gulf War veterans."

The report calls for a minimum of \$60 million to be spent annually for Gulf War research.

The military no longer uses the type of PB pills or pesticides employed during the first Gulf War.

-- Compiled by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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