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US Presence on Foreign Soil is Tainted

By David Armstrong, Globe Staff, 11/15/99

With a US military presence in more than 140 countries, the question of how Washington should deal with complaints of overseas environmental contamination is emerging as a prickly financial and diplomatic issue.

In July, the Department of Defense inspector general warned that contamination of foreign soil by the military is an issue that will have to be addressed.

"DOD presence in other countries has resulted in environmental damage that will require eventual cleanup and disposal, and the cleanup costs will be substantial," the report cautioned. "Potentially significant liabilities may exist in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Turkey, Great Britain, Spain, Canada, and other nations."

Last month, representatives from a dozen countries met in Washington to discuss base cleanups and lobbied members of Congress to help remove hazardous waste from overseas facilities. "It is an important moral issue and public health issue and environmental issue," said John Lindsay-Poland, an American activist who has studied base contamination in Panama and Puerto Rico.

A look at some of the countries allegedly contaminated by the United States:

GERMANY

The DOD inspector general this year said cleanup costs are expected to total at least \$1 billion. Germany is among the countries with the most rigorous environmental laws and toughest enforcement standards. It is also host to one of the largest contingents of American forces overseas, with 69,663 active duty personnel stationed there. Not surprisingly, Germany also receives the bulk of the \$165 million a year the Pentagon spends on overseas environmental

compliance and cleanup. Last year, the military reported projects to clean up landfills, remove PCBs, repair sewage treatment plants, and remediate contaminated soil.

Rainer Knoll, the head of a citizens group concerned with environmental issues at the US Army base in Grafenwohr, said the area is contaminated with chemicals, heavy metals, and depleted uranium. Residents are particularly concerned with ground water allegedly contaminated by a US landfill in the town, Knoll said.

JAPAN

A Japanese environmental group -- NEPA Coalition of Japan -- has documented severe contamination at the Yokosuka US Naval base. The group says a September 1998 report found soil contaminated with lead at 150 times the Japanese standard; arsenic at 10 times the limit; and mercury at a level 440 times greater than Japanese standards. Ground water was also tainted by poisons, including lead at 520 times the national standard. The group also said it has found pollution at several other bases, including the dumping of PCBs into a pond and the systematic dumping of oil-contaminated water into public sewerage systems.

PANAMA

The US military is currently cleaning up thousands of acres of jungle firing ranges and testing sites used by soldiers throughout this century. The work is being done in anticipation of the transfer of the Panama Canal to Panama next year. The cleanup, however, has been controversial, with Panamanian government officials complaining about the thoroughness of the work and a lack of information provided by the Pentagon. Earlier this year, 25 members of Congress wrote to Defense Secretary William Cohen urging him to release more records, saying they feared "the US government is preparing to walk away from its responsibility to adequately clean up US



CONTAMINATED WATER from the wells at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines has contributed to the poor health of families who moved there after the United States left in 1991, including Epifania de Leon and her daughter Michelle. (Globe Staff Photo / Tom Herde)

military bases and firing ranges in Panama that were used to test conventional and chemical weapons."

CANADA

When Canadian officials turned to the United States several years ago for help in cleaning up environmental contamination at former US military facilities in their country, the Pentagon said it had "no legal obligation" to do so.

But unlike what has happened in many other countries, the Pentagon later reversed itself and agreed to pay \$100 million to clean up the former US sites in Canada.

In a letter to Congress last year, Deputy Secretary of Defense John J. Hamre said the payments were "a special case not duplicated anywhere else in the world," and one unlikely to be repeated because "there is no other country with the same combination of geography, historical relationship, and vital significance to US national security."

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