



SECRETARY OF THE ARMY
WASHINGTON

SEP 19 2009

The Honorable Byron L. Dorgan
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Dorgan:

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates asked me to respond on his behalf to your August 17, 2009 letter regarding your increasing concern about the health and well being of Soldiers who were possibly exposed to sodium dichromate at the Qarmat Ali water injection facility near Basra, Iraq in 2003.

I share your concerns for the health and well-being of our Soldiers, and welcome this opportunity to update you on the status of our continuing efforts to care for these Soldiers and former Soldiers. We have been actively engaged in this effort for many months and have expanded our partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) to care for any Soldiers who may experience health issues from their service.

During the last few months we have continued our efforts to identify and contact Soldiers who may have been at the site, and have worked with several agencies of the federal government to identify potential health issues and provide the service connection needed to ensure eligibility for care. These agencies include the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the Institute of Medicine, and the DVA. The Army will continue to pursue this issue vigorously and ensure that we are doing everything we can for our Soldiers.

The enclosed document provides both detailed answers to your questions and the current status of our efforts to locate and provide necessary care for our Soldiers.

Finally, in May 2009 I directed the Army's Corps of Engineers to conduct an investigation into the incident, focusing both on the sequence of events and the obligations the Army and Kellogg, Brown and Root had in responding to the presence of sodium dichromate at Qarmat Ali and protecting the personnel working there. This investigation is ongoing. Furthermore, the Inspector General of the Department of Defense recently initiated a review of the Army's actions regarding this incident.

Thank you for your inquiry into this matter and for your continued support for the health of our Soldiers and veterans.

Sincerely,

Pete Geren

Enclosure

ENCLOSURE

3RD INFANTRY DIVISION SOLDIERS EXPOSED AT QARMAT ALI

The comments made in testimony during the August 3, 2009, Senate Democratic Committee hearing concerning the presence of 3rd Infantry Division Soldiers at Qarmat Ali are a serious concern to the Army. As part of the review of the incident at Qarmat Ali, the Army sent members of the Army to each state involved and conducted extensive interviews with Soldiers and leaders from their National Guard units. The Army also conducted extensive reviews of all available reports concerning the incident.

One of the Army's goals was to identify all the units that may have been present at the facility. The seven-Soldier squad from the 3rd Infantry Division was not mentioned in any report available for review, nor were they mentioned by any Soldiers serving at the site. Once their presence in the area came to the Army's attention, I directed my staff to contact Sergeant Bootay and locate the other Soldiers in that squad so that these Soldiers can receive appropriate care.

The Army has been working closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) for many months in response to this incident. The Joint Force Headquarters of our National Guard in each state involved have been working closely with the DVA to notify every Soldier who may have spent even a single day at the facility. They are working hard to achieve our joint goal of ensuring that each of those Soldiers has been registered in the Gulf War Registry, and removing the burden of proving service connection for this incident.

The Army, in conjunction with the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), has begun another effort with the national-level DVA for this effort. The DVA has decided to create a specialized registry to track the Soldiers who were exposed in this incident. They have outlined a specific and focused medical evaluation based on the exposure of concern.

The Army has spent the last several months working with various agencies of the federal government to determine if any of the current health issues experienced by Soldiers and former Soldiers may have come from exposure to Sodium Dichromate. The Army contacted the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to request an epidemiology study of the Soldiers in this incident. Unfortunately, they have reported that the population involved is too small for definitive results.

The Army then contacted the Institutes of Medicine (IOM) to request a review to determine all possible health issues (short- and long-term) that can arise from exposure to Sodium Dichromate. As the DVA has informed the Army that they already have the information, the Army is now working with the DVA to support their registry efforts and to establish service connectivity.

DOD-COMPILED LIST OF SOLDIERS INVOLVED IN THE INCIDENT

The Army is working closely with OSD and the DVA to ensure that the health concerns of Soldiers and former Soldiers are addressed immediately. The Army's Joint Force Headquarters and the National Guard Bureau are compiling lists of names, addresses, and social security numbers for the Soldiers involved. Each state's National Guard has this information and is updating and using it to contact the Soldiers and former Soldiers. The states are also sharing the information with the regional DVA offices as part of the registration effort.

While the Army must be mindful of statutory limits on sharing of privacy information, the Army is sharing all the personal information that we can within those limits to assist in this process. The latest update from the National Guard Bureau is below. Each state continues its efforts to locate and notify every Soldier and former Soldier who may have been present at the site.

Soldiers Likely Exposed	Confirmed contact	Enrolled in Registry	Medical Exam Completed
1164	863	258	154

Not all of the 1164 Soldiers listed as likely exposed served at the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant. Each unit had Soldiers who rotated duties at the plant, as well as Soldiers who went to the plant for administrative missions (e.g., water and food supply, mail delivery, etc). Until the states can confirm that a Soldier was actually at the site, they are treating every Soldier in the unit as a potentially exposed Soldier.

The biggest challenge that the Joint Force Headquarters face is the issue of contacting former Soldiers. Upon separating from the Guard, some Soldiers neglect to inform the Guard of any changes in their contact information. States have had to rely on several techniques to locate these Soldiers, including town hall meetings, telephone hotlines, the cooperation of local news media, and contacts with former Soldier colleagues.

With continued diligence, the Joint Force Headquarters will find and contact all Soldiers who were deployed in 2003 to determine if they went to Qarmat Ali. Once notified, Soldiers will be highly encouraged to enroll in the registry and make themselves available for the medical exam. Working closely with the regional DVA offices, the Army is optimistic that the Army and DVA will achieve our joint goal of registering 100% of the Soldiers present at Qarmat Ali.

ONGOING INVESTIGATIONS AND CONTRACTOR OVERSIGHT

The Army's agency for investigating incidents of exposure and other health related concerns is the US Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM) often abbreviated as "CHPPM." Though they are an Army agency, CHPPM also investigates exposure incidents and health issues for all of DoD.

In addition to the sodium dichromate issue, the Army has four ongoing investigations in the Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan Theaters concerning potential exposure. The Army continues to

track the possible health outcomes associated with the sulfur fire at Mishraq in 2003. This fire, near Mosul in Iraq, burned from 24 June to 21 July 2003, and produced a plume containing atmospheric pollutants. A 2006 epidemiology study did not rule out the possibility of an association between the fire and respiratory diseases, so the Army continues to look at possible health outcomes associated with this incident.

The second ongoing investigation is a joint effort with DoD and the National Resource Council (NRC) to collect data and determine the possible health risks from airborne particulates from the combination of fine sand and dust in theater.

Burn pits in theater are another area of continued monitoring and concern. USCENTCOM has made improvements in this area by using landfills and establishing recycling programs to reduce the volume of waste to be burned. There are now 25 incinerators in operation, replacing burn pits. Other operational burn pits have been relocated to more suitable locations. The lessons learned in Iraq are also being used to develop and improve the waste management plan for Afghanistan.

The final ongoing investigation is the continued air monitoring and risk communication activities at Kuwait's Shuaiba Sea Port of Embarkation and Debarkation.

The Army is obtaining information from OSD on the DoD oversight procedures for contractors working in potential areas of exposure. Upon receipt, the Army will ensure that it is forwarded to you.

DVA ENROLLMENT AND ELIGIBILITY TO RECEIVE HEALTH CARE

Soldiers are eligible for care in DVA facilities for five years after their last discharge. This healthcare extends to any issue other than those that clearly could not have occurred while in service. The end of the five-year period does not end the Soldiers' ability to receive care. Any Soldier who was seen during those five years can continue to be seen and receive care.

Any Soldier who was not seen during the five-year period, and has no claim or other qualification, may still receive care through the DVA. They will, however, be assigned a lower priority for care. Any Soldier in this group who can establish a service connection for a medical issue can be granted a higher priority and receive care at no cost.

Establishing eligibility of care for any Soldier who may have been at Qarmat Ali is another common goal of DoD and the DVA. The DVA is working internally to use the registry and list of possible medical issues from chromium exposure to establish service connection. The Army, through the Joint Force Headquarters, is working with regional DVA offices using current statutorily accepted methods of establishing service connection (i.e. Line of Duty investigations).

The Army welcomes your desire to assist in proposing legislation to help with this process. The Army is working with the DVA to identify whether any legislative changes are necessary.



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

October 8, 2009

The Honorable Byron Dorgan
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Dorgan:

Thank you for your co-signed letter regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) actions in response to a potential exposure of National Guard members to hexavalent chromium at Qarmat Ali, Iraq from April to October 2003.

VA has been proactive in its response to this exposure event. There are approximately 600 National Guard members, primarily from four states, who may have been exposed to sodium dichromate (a source of hexavalent chromium) while serving at Qarmat Ali. In June 2008, when we first learned of this exposure, all VA Environmental Health Coordinators who run the registry program were provided background information about this issue and were instructed to offer a Registry examination to all Veterans who were potentially exposed to sodium dichromate in 2003. In addition, local VA staff is participating in meetings held by the National Guard to provide information about enrolling for VA health care, scheduling a health registry examination, and obtaining details about other VA benefits.

We have the names and contact information of all National Guard members present at Qarmat Ali. We have also verified the numbers of these Veterans who have received a Gulf War Registry (GWR) examination. The enclosed Fact Sheet provides a State-by-State breakdown of those numbers. In addition, many of the Guard members have also enrolled in the VA health care system.

We are in the process of augmenting the GWR to reflect service at Qarmat Ali. The involved Guard members who have had an initial examination will be recalled to have a complete exposure assessment, as well as a more targeted physical examination and ancillary testing looking for indications of health outcomes that may be related to hexavalent chromium. Those who have yet to enroll in the GWR will get this targeted examination initially. They will also receive a chest radiograph and pulmonary function testing. This evaluation will be repeated periodically (every year for examination and every 5 years for chest radiograph).

All of this testing can be done within the authority granted for the GWR, therefore the loss of treatment eligibility 5 years post discharge is not an issue. The Veterans Health Administration is working with the Veterans Benefits Administration to develop an expedited process for service connection for those individuals who have a history of exposure and health outcomes that are known to be related to hexavalent chromium.

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Once we have made these modifications to the GWR and have established the appropriate process for the involved VA medical centers, the Department will send letters to these soldiers explaining the new process and details regarding how they can get their examination.

I hope that this answers your questions regarding how VA is responding to this exposure event. Thank you for your continued support of our mission. A similar letter has been sent to the other co-signers of your letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric K. Shinseki". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "E".

Eric K. Shinseki

Enclosure

Fact Sheet

Veterans Exposed to Sodium Dichromate and included in Gulf War Registry

State	# Enrolled in Registry	#Total Reservists at Qarmat Ali	# Remaining
West Virginia	27	128	101
Oregon	20	292	272
South Carolina	7	146	139
Indiana	117	136	19

This information is current as of September 2009