clearly impossible. Gary Crocker, an intelligence analyst for the State Department, did say that they were obtained in "clandestine" operations specifically planned to obtain evidence of the use of chemical and toxin weapons. One mask was removed from a dead Soviet soldier in Afghanistan in December 1981; the other was obtained in Kabul, Afghanistan, in September 1981. Crocker says "the people who got it were instructed on how to handle it", and were provided with a similar sample container that would prevent contamination. "Things were handled properly all down the line".

Dr H. Bruno Schiefer, who conducted a study of toxin weapons use in South-East Asia earlier this year for the Canadian government (a study that found effects that could not be explained by "naturally occurring phenomena"), says "It doesn't really matter who" provides samples — the results "still don't stand up in court". Schiefer says "we would need some sort of verification" by scientists who could go into the affected areas, collect samples and bring them back for analysis.

Stronger criticism comes from Arthur Westing of Hampshire College. "The US has a long history of doctoring evidence", he says. "I don't know if the State Department is lying, but they haven't come close to proving their case." Westing says that "the most elementary mistake they made" was not to get blood and urine samples from a control population outside the area where toxins were allegedly sprayed. The parts-per-billion levels of trichothecenes found in the medical specimens from alleged victims may, he says, reflect natural exposure to the toxins: "There's no question that the *Fusarium* fungi that produce these toxins do occur in that region. The *Fusarium* fungus responsible for T-2, for instance, was described in the 1930s as occurring in Vietnam, according to Westing. And Westing points out that aflatoxin, well known to contaminate food, was found in one of the alleged victims at a concentration comparable with that of T-2.

Mirocha counters that his experiments with cows show that relatively large amounts of T-2 — hundreds of milligrammes — have to be ingested before it shows up in the blood at even the 10–100 parts in 10⁹ level. "To say it's present endemically in the food is absurd", he says.

The State Department, for its part, seems less concerned with technical details than with the overall pattern of evidence. "I could take any piece of evidence and give you an alternative hypothesis", Crocker says, but the "strength of the case" lies in the agreement among reports from refugees and defectors, intelligence information and laboratory analyses. That argument is not likely to convince many sceptics; definitive proof may come only when an independent group of experts is allowed into Laos and Kampuchea.

Stephen Budiansky

Tasmanian environment

Dam threatens wilderness

Canberra

An area rich in archaeological sites from the last ice age will disappear beneath a flood of water as part of a hydro-electricity project unless Australia's national government overcomes its reluctance to interfere with a state decision. Last week Unesco's World Heritage Committee, meeting in Paris, placed the Western Tasmania Wilderness National Park on its register, thus increasing the pressure on the Tasmanian state government to reconsider its plan to build a dam on the Gordon River, just below its confluence with the Franklin River. The dam would inundate 37 kilometres of the Gordon, 37 kilometres of the Franklin and part of all the tributaries of the Gordon including all the recently discovered archaeological sites.

The national government is now left in a curious position. In November 1981 it backed the then Labour state government in applying to put the national park on the heritage list. When a newly elected Tasmanian government later decided to allow the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission to build the dam the national government came under pressure to stop the state scheme. Finally, on 8 December, the federal cabinet decided not to interfere.

Professor John Mulvaney of Australian National University resigned from the council of the Museum of Australia in protest at the decision, arguing that the threatened area qualified for the heritage list under the United Nations convention's criteria for both cultural and natural properties — as well as having archaeological value the area contains an important natural habitat for huon pine trees, some as much as 2,000 years old.

The relationship between national and state governments in Australia is a sensitive issue and the Canberra government is

reluctant to oppose decisions made at state level. In this case the hydro-electric scheme is seen as a way of attracting industry to an area with the highest unemployment rate in Australia — 12 per cent — so it would be a major step for politicians to oppose it.

The farthest the government has so far gone in defence of the national park is a statement from Mr Thomas McVeigh, minister for home affairs and conservation, to the House of Representatives,

saying the government "intends to enter discussions with the Tasmanian government with a view to minimizing the damage that the dam might cause . . . it will look towards an agreed management plan for the total area".

The argument that seems to have clinched the decision at last week's Paris meeting is that placing the national park on the heritage list will increase its chances of being preserved. Even so, the Tasmanian government is claiming that the listing gives the dam "the green light to go ahead" — a deliberate misinterpretation it seems.

Vimala Sarma is

The entrance to Fraser Cave — due to be submerged if Tasmania's dam scheme goes ahead. In January last year stone tools and human remains dating from the last ice age were found here. The findings are reported in detail in the next issue of *Nature* (6 January 1983, p. 28).