

CRIMES OF WAR

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POISONOUS WEAPONS

By Gwynne Roberts

Shaho was nine when the Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja was chemically bombed by the Iraqi Air Force in 1988. He still vividly remembers the planes overhead, the clouds of gas smelling of fruit, and then fleeing for his life to Iran. Within weeks, Shaho began to suffer back pains and has been unable to stand or walk for the past six years. His condition is known as scoliosis, severe curvature of the spine. He has no doubt what caused it.

“Before the chemical attack, I was perfectly healthy,” says Shaho. “I am certain that poison gas caused my illness. My mother lost her sight at the time, and I’ve got gradually worse ever since.” He spends each day at home lying on his mattress, turned every thirty minutes by his devoted sister to avoid bedsores. His family has gone deep into debt to try to find a cure—without success. (Although research into the effects of nerve and mustard gas on the human body is limited, such agents are known to cause disorders in a range of tissues in addition to the brain and spinal cord and may thus be responsible for abnormal growth of cells in bone.)

Nizar, twenty-three, also from Halabja, is hardly able to walk and crumbles to the floor after a few paces. He bursts into tears. “I can’t even go to the toilet on my own,” he says. “Please help me. I am afraid of ending up in bed forever.” He too was gassed and he lay unconscious for two days. The gases, which smelled of apples, attacked his nervous system, and over the years he has gradually lost control of his muscles. Both cases link severe neurological damage to chemical weapons.

In one way both were lucky—they, at least, survived the bombardment.

The battle for Halabja began on March 15, 1988, when Kurdish rebels and Iranian Revolutionary Guards, equipped with chemical warfare suits, moved into the town, driving out Iraqi units in heavy fighting. Townspeople were then stopped from fleeing Halabja and forced by the invaders to return to their homes. This tactic was to cost thousands of lives.

The chemical attack began a day later at 6:20 p.m. and continued sporadically over three days. Wave after wave of bombers—seven to eight in each wing—attacked Halabja, a town of eighty thousand, and all roads leading to the surrounding mountains. They dropped a cocktail of poison gases: mustard gas, the nerve agents sarin, tabun, and, according to a well-informed Iraqi military source, VX, the most lethal of all, which Iraq had just begun to manufacture. Clouds of gas hung over the town and the surrounding hills, blotting out the sky and contaminating the fertile plains nearby.

The townspeople had no protection and the chemicals soaked into their clothes, skin, eyes, and lungs. At least five thousand, and probably many more, died within hours. Many were poisoned in the cellars where they had sought refuge—trapped by gases that were heavier than air. It was the largest chemical attack ever launched against a civilian population.

On the road out of the town, an estimated four thousand were killed near the village of Anab as they attempted to flee to Iran. Many flung themselves into a pond to wash off the chemicals but died within minutes. Their corpses lay undisturbed for months, deadly toxins from their bodies seeping into the earth and reportedly contaminating the water table.

Some survivors fled into Iran, where they live to this day. Others who escaped to nearby Kurdish towns returned to Halabja and now live in the very homes where scores of close relatives perished. They say they know that their houses are still contaminated but cannot afford to live anywhere else. They complain that mortar dust still causes skin lesions and eye soreness.

Until relatively recently, evidence of the attack still littered the hills around Halabja, empty chemical shells with Russian markings standing upright in the plowed earth like grotesque mushrooms. Casings were stacked in local scrapyards, and even used as flowerpots by Halabjans.

Local people are convinced that the chemicals blighted the lands around Halabja, once the most fertile region in the Middle East. Farmers complain that agricultural output has dropped dramatically in the years after the attack. Pomegranate orchards dried out, and other fruit trees became unproductive.

They complain that the chemicals also caused mutations in plant and animal life. The town has been visited by plagues of locusts for the first time in living memory. According to a local surgeon, snakes and scorpions have become more poisonous since the attack, up to twenty people dying from lethal bites each year, a tenfold increase in the region.

But these chemical weapons left behind an even more frightening legacy. According to Christine Gosden, professor of medical genetics at Liverpool University, who accompanied me to Halabja, these poisons have genetically damaged the local population.

After the Iraqi Army withdrew from the region after Desert Storm in 1991, Halabja was shunned by the outside world and ignored by the international aid agencies. Its inhabitants, however, continue to live a total nightmare—their health has been irreversibly damaged in the attack, as well as that of their children and their children’s children.

During our visit, we were literally overwhelmed by people exhibiting a variety of serious irreversible medical conditions ranging from aggressive cancers, neurological damage, and skin diseases to heart-rending disfigurements and severe psychiatric disorders. Surgeons have grown used to removing bullets from people unsuccessful in their attempts at suicide.

Professor Gosden, working with doctors in the area, compared the Halabja rates of infertility, congenital malformations, and cancers with those of an unexposed population from a city in the same region. She found that, ten years after the attack, the frequency rates were three to four times higher. Most worrisome of all, she discovered that more and more children were dying each year of leukemia and lymphomas. Their tumors were more aggressive than elsewhere, and there is no chemotherapy or radiotherapy available.

“The situation is a genetic time bomb which is exploding into future generations,” she said. “It is far worse than I could have ever imagined.”

Shaho’s case exemplifies the need for further research. Scoliosis may seem an unlikely side-effect of chemical weapons, but Dr. Gosden points out that the human bone structure is not static; in fact our entire skeleton is replaced each year. Other bone disorders such as osteoporosis can lead to the shrinking of the skeleton, while cancer can cause severe Dowager’s hump and the weakening and fractures of bone.

Halabja is certainly a medical catastrophe. There is also little doubt in the minds of Halabjans who is responsible: Saddam Hussein and the western companies which supplied Iraq with the chemical precursors and hardware to manufacture the gas.

The attack happened during the final stages of the Iran-Iraq conflict and the Iraqis were in clear breach of the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning the use of “asphyxiating, poisonous, or other gases, and of all analogous liquids.” The attack also violated the 1899 and 1907 Hague Regulations, which ban the use of “poison or poisoned weapons.”

Their deployment against civilians, however, puts this crime onto another dimension. Iraq has not ratified the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions protecting civilians during combat. But in this case, the Hague Regulations of 1907 are applicable. They stipulate that any force bombarding a populated area has to

take precautions to minimize incidental damage. It is clear that no such precautions were taken.

There are growing calls in the United States, encouraged by the government, to set up a war crimes tribunal and brand Hussein a war criminal. The Halabja gas attack, and its aftermath, are crucial in the case.

Halabjans allege that western governments were also to blame because they turned a blind eye on the illicit trade in chemicals and equipment needed for Iraq's weapons program. Khomeini's Iran seemed a more pressing problem at the time. Halabja remains a sensitive issue for many western governments because such allegations, if proven, could damage national interests. Keeping the names of these companies secret still seems to be a priority.

In 1993, the United Nations reached a formal agreement with the Iraqi government not to reveal the names of companies which had supplied the regime with chemical precursors. Nine years later, just before the recent Iraq War, Saddam supplied the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with a 12,000-page weapons declaration identifying all of them. However, this was kept secret and never officially published.

In the meantime, the Halabjans grow increasingly angry. They complain about unemployment, poor roads, inadequate housing and health care, a pressing problem with thousands suffering from respiratory illnesses, cancer and other diseases. The economic boom evident in much of Kurdistan has passed Halabja by.

Townpeople were unhappy that top officials, both Kurdish and foreign, visit the town, and cite it as justification for the war against Saddam, promptly forgetting their offers of help to its afflicted population as soon as they leave. They also say that whilst Saddam's associates may have to answer at their trial in Baghdad for their crimes against Halabja, those who provided the regime with the tools to launch the attack will escape penalty.

"Those who are suffering need a lot of money to get treatment in western hospitals," said Abdel Qadar, a survivor of the 1988 attack who heads the Halabja Chemical Victims' Society. "We want to see those who helped Saddam punished and our rights restored."

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