

The meaning of Halabja

By Jean Pascal Zanders | 25 March 2013

Halabja is a name etched in the history of chemical warfare. There are few documented instances of deliberate chemical weapons attacks against civilian communities; the one that Saddam Hussein's forces made against the Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja 25 years ago is the largest. Human Rights Watch recorded more than 3,200 immediate fatalities, with many more Kurdish citizens exposed to clouds of poisonous gas. Since the March 16, 1988 assault, thousands of people have succumbed to injuries suffered then, as well as to exposure-related health problems, including secondary infections that overwhelm compromised immune systems. Children are born with genetic defects or die prematurely because genetic damage is being passed down the generations.

In two years, the world will commemorate the centennial of modern chemical warfare. Just as the Belgian city of Ieper -- where the German Imperial Army introduced the first gas attacks during World War I -- is indelibly linked to its chemical past, Halabja stands as an international symbol for the many chemical attacks during the 1980 to 1988 Iran–Iraq war and the genocidal campaigns that Iraq conducted then against its Kurdish minority. In the immediate aftermath, Iran went to great lengths to publicize the bombing of Halabja, so the world would finally take notice Iraq's violations of humanitarian law.

Despite the powerful pictures of mothers and elderly men having dropped dead in their tracks, still clutching infants, and of the discolored, bloated bodies of children, Iran has had difficulty accepting Halabja -- located some 15 kilometers inside Iraq -- as a symbol of the pain it suffered from chemical weapons attacks.

From the end of 1983 onward, Iran's soldiers were regularly exposed to Iraqi chemical attack. Unprotected and ill-prepared for chemical warfare until the war's final year, they suffered many casualties from mustard gas, tabun, and sarin; many died prolonged, painful deaths. Iran still must tend to tens of thousands of people exposed to toxic chemicals during the war.

One attack was especially indiscriminate. On June 28, 1987, Saddam's air force struck the northern Iranian town of Sardasht. Almost three quarters of the 12,000 inhabitants were exposed to mustard gas; half of those exposed required medical treatment. Some 130 people, overwhelmingly civilians, died. Iran has since pressed for Sardasht to be internationally recognized as a memorial to the victims of chemical warfare, just as Halabja has been.

The story of Halabja is a tale of two cities and a struggle over symbols.

The legacy of Halabja. At the end of the 1980s, negotiations on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) were sputtering. The United States had just started production of then-new binary artillery shells that would, when fired, deliver the nerve gas sarin. Revelation of the Halabja attack injected impetus and urgency into the treaty negotiations and forced nations across the world to focus on terminating chemical weapons programs. Despite

West concerns about the size of the Soviet chemical arsenal and its purpose in Warsaw Pact military doctrine, almost all European NATO members vehemently opposed any plans to have binary munitions or their components pre-positioned on their territory. National political debates forced the US Army to withdraw its forward-deployed chemical munitions from West Germany in 1990.

In 1989, because Iraq had so blatantly violated international law, French President François Mitterrand convened an international conference in Paris to restore the authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Western complicity in Iraq's chemical warfare -- through the sale of chemical precursors and relevant equipment, arms shipments, and political and intelligence support of Iraqi war operations -- had seriously undermined the protocol, the only legal instrument banning chemical weapons use then in existence.

The meeting was eventful. While Iraq was given all the consideration of a party to the Geneva Protocol, Kurdish representatives were denied a platform to address the delegates. Iran was furious about the continuing refusal to hold Iraq responsible for six years of chemical warfare, claiming a moral high ground for having never retaliated in kind, despite its right to do so under then-existing international law.

In the end, delegates agreed on a final declaration that supported the Geneva Protocol and urged redoubled efforts to adopt the Chemical Weapons Convention at the earliest possible date. Following the Paris conference, several other high-level meetings that involved stakeholders other than governments -- including the chemical industry -- in CWC negotiations were held later in the year. In September, the United States and Soviet Union concluded the bilateral Wyoming Agreement, by which both sides agreed to verified destruction of their respective chemical weapons arsenals. It was one atrocity among many during the Iran-Iraq war, but Halabja heralded the beginning of the end of legitimate possession of chemical weapons by anyone.

The tale of two cities revisited. Iran's struggle to have Sardasht recognized as an international symbol of its suffering reflects the isolation the country felt during the eight-year war with Iraq. The ramifications of that isolation continue today.

When the United Nations independently confirmed that chemical warfare had been conducted during the Iran-Iraq war, Western nations imposed chemical weapons-related export controls on *both* belligerents, even though Iraq was a confirmed violator of the Geneva Protocol. Iran was denied the right to retaliate against Iraqi chemical attacks, and, according to Iranian officials I spoke with, it was also denied the defensive equipment and medical stores that would have protected its soldiers and citizens from the effects of poison gas. Iranian diplomats had to turn to the black market in the countries where they were stationed for ingredients as basic as charcoal for gasmask filters. Often they were conned, and the country started developing indigenous offensive and defensive capabilities in regard to chemical weapons. In the years since the end of the war, Iran has declared the destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal and joined the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Today's political leaders and much of the population belong to a generation that grew up on the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war. The experience of chemical warfare taught them that they must overcome technological backwardness to survive. It also taught them that they cannot rely on the international law for justice, or on the international community to come to their assistance in the darkest hour.

The international community's denial of Sardasht -- even more than material support for Saddam Hussein that enabled the attack on Halabja -- is central to Iran's defiance in regard to its nuclear enrichment program. Self-sufficiency, self-reliance, autarky -- in all security-related matters, these are the concerns that drive the present leadership of Iran. Economic

and regional sanctions only confirm convictions that had eight long years to take root in the bloody soil of the trenches along the Iran-Iraq border.

Halabja may have instilled urgency in the negotiations that led to the Chemical Weapons Convention, thereby contributing to the establishment of a global prohibitory regime on the acquisition, manufacture, possession and use of an entire category of non-conventional weaponry. However, the international disregard of legitimate claims of major violations of international law for immediate geostrategic reasons makes the town also a symbol of the long-term danger of pursuing short-term interests.

Copyright © 2013 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. All Rights Reserved.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/25/2013 - 22:20): <http://www.thebulletin.org/node/9688>

IT IS 5 MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

www.thebulletin.org

