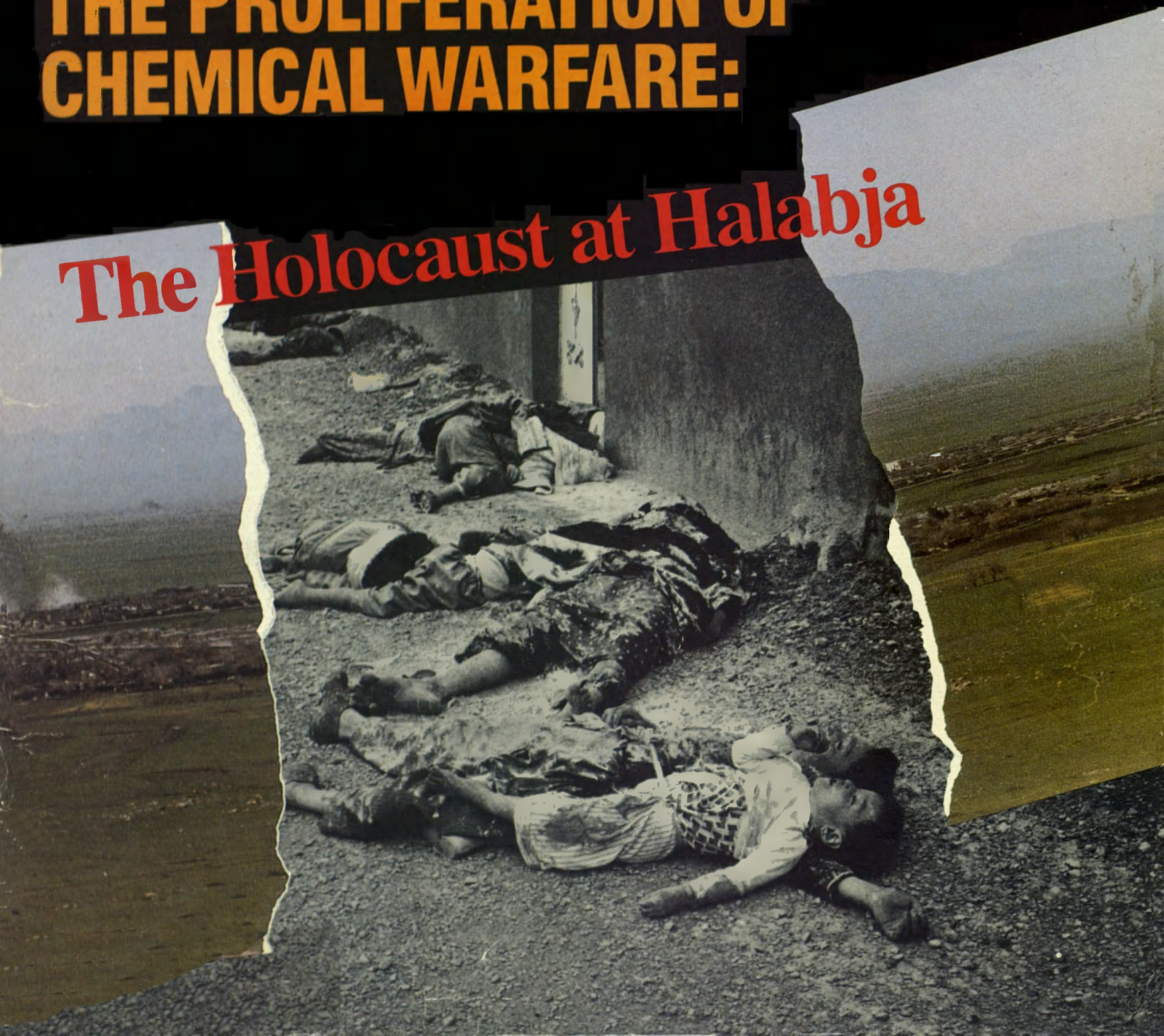


THE PROLIFERATION OF CHEMICAL WARFARE:

The Holocaust at Halabja



The early morning hours of Friday, March 18, 1988, witnessed an episode of human suffering in modern times which will not be easily eradicated from the conscience of future generations. In a shocking series of news reports, the television screens and newspapers around the world brought home to a spellbound audience horrifying details of a chemical weapons attack on a civilian population which resulted in thousands of deaths and lasting injury. The images were inescapably reminiscent of the ghastly afflictions of Hiroshima, Nazi gas chambers, and similar chemical attacks during the First World War. 'Halabja' is a name which will surely resound for years to come with the human torment that it has come to represent. The collective conscience of mankind will have to work vigorously in order to elevate itself from the moral degradation which nearly seven years of continual deployment of these banned weapons have perpetrated. More importantly, a serious international effort must be made to ensure that such tribulations will never plague our world again.

UNIVERSAL BAN

Chemical weapons were used on a large scale for the first time during the First World War. Dichloroethyl sulfide, discovered in the early part of the 19th century was nicknamed 'mustard gas' by the British soldiers who first encountered it as a weapon in 1917. Winston Churchill dubbed it 'hellish poison.' Mustard gas acts as a blistering agent that devours the flesh. As well as progressively affecting the lungs and skin, mustard gas also impairs the bone marrow function. It often means a lingering and painful death. Introduced in the war by the Germans, it was employed routinely and devastatingly by all sides during World War I. In a particularly large scale use, the Germans virtually wiped out the Belgian city of Ypres in 1917. The deployment of chemical weapons by Iraq in Halabja is believed to be the single biggest use of the lethal gases since Ypres.⁶

Nearly 100,000 people perished by chemical warfare in World War I. So great was the resultant human suffering that the belligerent sides joined in 1925 in signing the Geneva Protocol, banning forever the use of chemical warfare "justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world."⁷ Iraq is also a signatory to the 1925 Protocol.⁸

Later reaffirmation of the ban, extending it to the production and storage of chemical weapons was asserted in the 1972 Geneva Convention and later in the United States resolution No. 37/98. There are currently negotiations underway in Geneva on a new international agreement that would call for the destruction of all existing stockpiles of chemical weapons.

Violations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol have been miraculously few and far between until Iraq's large-scale deployment of such weapons. Gruesome memories of World War I prevented even Hitler from actively deploying chemical weapons on a large scale and in combat even though the Germans had developed the still deadlier 'nerve gas.' In fact, the only allegations of the use of the banned weapons since the treaty and before Iraq's use have been leveled against the French in Morocco, the Italians in Ethiopia, and the Japanese in China, all during the 1930's. Later, the Egyptians in Yemen in 1963, the Laotians in internal strife, and the Vietnamese in Kampuchea, both in 1975, and finally the Russians in the ongoing war in Afghanistan, were accused of having used chemical weapons. The scale and magnitude of these alleged deployments were limited to small amounts and often they were not corroborated.



IRAQ'S USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Iraq's deployment of internationally banned chemical weapons began soon after it launched a full-scale offensive against Iran in 1980. The first positively diagnosed case was a nerve gas attack by artillery shelling in the Halaleh border region on January 13, 1981, which killed at least 7 Iranian soldiers. The British publication Foreign Report commented on Iraq's deployment of chemical weapons at that time: "In its war with Iran, Iraq uses a weapon which paralyzes the nervous system of the victims...the Iraqis used the weapon for the first time last January."⁹ Up through July, 1983, the deployments were primarily limited to mortar and artillery shelling. Over 35 cases of mustard and nerve gas poisonings leading to death were recorded during that period.

On August 8, 1983, during the first aerial bombardment with chemical agents by Iraq, 24 people were injured in Shiverash. In the period from October 21 to 30, 1983, Iraq deployed chemical weapons specifically against civilians for the first time. Attacks on Bademjan, Baneh, and other nearby villages left a total of 9 residents dead and over 14 others injured. Most of the victims of those attacks were women and children. Up to March, 1984, a total of 2617 people were diagnosed as having been affected by one of the many varieties of toxic agents employed by Iraq in the war.¹⁰ Many of those affected did not survive. Many others were injured, most commonly, by the total loss of vision due to exposure to mustard gas.

Deployment of Internationally
Banned Chemical Weapons by Iraq

YEAR	NUMBER OF VICTIMS
1981	11
1982	29
1983	574
1984	2237
1985	3267
1986	11141
1987	13496
1988	13673
1st quarter	

Source: U.N. document No. S/19816. 21 April 1988

TALK NOT ACTION

By March, 1984, the blatant use of internationally banned chemical weapons by Iraq had become so widespread that despite all diplomatic and political impediments, the international organizations were forced to adopt a stance vis-a-vis the violations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. The International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.), in an official memorandum issued in this connection declared: "The International Red Cross commissioned on March 6, 1984, a medical team to visit a number of patients confined in some of the hospitals in Teheran. All the symptoms observed on 160 combatants pointed to a disturbing conclusion that the injuries had been caused by certain chemicals whose production and use have been outlawed by international regulations."¹¹

Concurrently, the U.S. State Department accused Iraq of using 'lethal chemical weapons.' The statement concluded by confirming that 'available evidence' pointed to the widespread use of chemical weapons by Iraq in violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol.¹² Later in March, 1984, U.S. intelligence officials said they had incontrovertible evidence that Iraq was deploying nerve gas in the war. They linked the nerve gas production to the sale of equipment and chemicals to Iraq by a West German company. A probe by the West German Government also confirmed the sale of a pesticide plant adaptable to the manufacturing of chemical weapons to Iraq by the Karl Kolb Company.¹³

After some seventy of those who had received more intense injuries were flown to Europe for treatment, the international community was impelled to follow up the matter more seriously. A four-member United Nations team of experts was dispatched to Iran during 14-20 March, 1984. After detailed research the team presented its report to the Secretary-General on March 21, 1984. Part of the report reads as follows:

"A—Chemical weapons in the form of aerial bombs have been used...

"B—The types of chemical agents used were bis-(2-Chlorethyl)-Sulfide, also known as Mustard gas, and Ethyl N, N-dimetholphosphore-Amidocyanide, a nerve gas agent known as Tabun."¹⁴

After this finding, too, Iraq continued the deployment of chemical weapons. The scale of the deployments grew consistently larger





instead of diminishing. The U.S. State Department again confirmed Iraq's deployment of chemical weapons in March 1985.¹⁵ The United Nations Security Council condemned the use of chemical weapons in a resolution issued in February 1986.¹⁶ Later, in March, 1986, the Council issued a statement in which it strongly condemned the continual use of chemical weapons by Iraq.¹⁷ By the Summer of 1986 the British government charged that Iraq's persistent use of mustard gas and other chemical agents was responsible for over 10,000 casualties.¹⁸ As recently as May, 1987, a United Nations inspection team reported that Iraq has stepped up its use of chemical weapons to include attacks on civilian targets.¹⁹

NEED FOR A FIRM STANCE

The international community took no serious action to stop this menace, and thus the carnage at Halabja took place. Despite ample evidence and worldwide verification of the facts which proved beyond the shadow of a doubt Iraq's disregard for international law and human rights, no concrete steps were taken to effectively curb the production and deployment of chemical weapons. Once again, political and diplomatic interests pushed reality into oblivion; however, this time, at a very high human cost.

In an instant, Iraq massacred more than 5,000 of its own citizens. Only eyebrows were raised. "Some ghastly glimpses on television. Some diplomatic tsks-ks. And on to another storyline," wrote Ken Adelman, Presidential Advisor on the INF negotiations and former director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, in an editorial in the Washington Times. "Gone like a flash!"²⁰

Walter J. Stoessel, Jr., chairman of the Congressional Chemical Warfare Review Commission of the United States Congress issued the following warning: "The failure of the U.S. and allied governments to devise and take strong measures against Iraq and its known suppliers has been an inadequate response.

"(When) such gross violations of human decency occur, strong action is called for, even at the expense of short-term economic or diplomatic interests," said Stoessel.²¹ Yet while the carnage at Halabja occurred, the U.S. State Department spokesman, Charles E. Redman, did not go beyond issuing a verbal condemnation: "This incident appears to be a particularly grave violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol against chemical warfare."²² This is after the U.S. State department had already confirmed the chemical attacks. "In addition to the media reports, we do have additional indicators that the massive attack (on Halabja) was in fact carried out by Iraq," a State department official had told reporters a week after the attack.²³ Furthermore, independent groups, such as 'Médicines Sans Frontières', an international organization of doctors who assist victims of major disasters, the I.C.R.C., and others, have also witnessed and confirmed the thousands of deaths and injuries resulting from the attack on Halabja.²⁴

Alarming, after the Halabja attack, the world community failed to respond in a timely and effective manner. The United



Nations in particular failed to introduce any forceful resolutions to deal with the threat of the spreading use of illegal weapons. In a halfhearted statement on April 26, 1988, the Security Council confirmed the assertions of the gas attack on Halabja, but proposed no new measures for dealing with Iraq's recurrent deployment.²⁵ In a much delayed move, the Council finally passed a resolution on May 6, 1988, condemning the deployment of chemical weapons.²⁶ In an irresolute manner typical of past U.N. statements on Iraq's deployment of chemical weapons, the resolution even failed to mention the carnage at Halabja.

A GRIM PROSPECT

A study by the United States Defense Department in the Spring of 1984 revealed that at least 14 to 16 countries possessed chemical arsenals at the time.²⁷ This was about 10 more than had been previously estimated. Chemical weapons are weapons of mass destruction and mass annihilation. They are fairly cheap, quite effective, and increasingly available. "Experts believe that any small nation capable of building a pesticide, petrochemical or detergent plant could adapt the facility to manufacture mustard gas or one of the virulently potent nerve gases invented by Nazi Germany."²⁸

Iraq is believed by western intelligence agencies to have one of the largest stockpiles of chemical weapons, including both poison and nerve gas.²⁹ Previous to Iraq's widespread use of chemical warfare, violations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning the use of such weapons have not exceeded a handful of incidents. Even those incidents have often remained unconfirmed allegations. Never has the world witnessed the deployment of these weapons of mass destruction on such a large scale since 1925. Presently, with the precedent set by Iraq, the world faces the danger of even more appalling incidents of the use of chemical weapons. Not having fully come to grips with the idea of living under the constant threat of a nuclear holocaust, the specter of Halabja is breaking new ground in a dreadful prospectus for the people of the world.

Undoubtedly, the lack of a firm global initiative to stop the spread of chemical weapons has been Iraq's number one encouragement to continue their deployment. In light of the carnage at Halabja, it is evident that the danger is far greater than a minor regional conflict.

"Still, the biggest thing to do is the toughest thing: to restore the international norm against any use of poison gas," writes Ken Adelman. "This means hitting any user, especially a flagrant one such as Iraq, hard. It means orchestrating a universal chorus of condemnation, calling a special U.N. (resolution) to blast such behavior, breaking off friendly relations. It means, in short, labeling the users for what they are: international criminals."³⁰



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“Three times, the U.N. Security Council has admonished Iraq for using chemicals in its war with Iran. But Iraq again has launched an illegal gas attack.”

The Washington Post, March 27, 1988.

“The deed is in every sense a war crime. It is compounded by Iraq’s lame official denials and unofficial alibis for using a dastardly weapon.”

The New York Times, March 26, 1988.

“Convincing evidence indicates, Iraq has again resorted to poison-gas attacks. This time the main victims have been hundreds and perhaps thousands of its own citizens.”

The Los Angeles Times, March 26, 1988.

“By all accounts, a combination of mustard gas and other, more instantly fatal, chemical agents caused the massive carnage at Halabja.”

The Guardian, London, March 27, 1988.

“Bodies lay on the streets and in the rubble of smashed buildings. Others sprawled half out of cars. Dead women clutched lifeless children.”

The Toronto Star, March 24, 1988.

“Kurdish civilians suffering from exposure to poison gas, including women and children, have confirmed that Iraq bombed one of its own cities with chemical agents.”

The Chicago Tribune, March 23, 1988.

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