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CHEMICAL WEAPONS AND THE U.S.-IRAQ CONFLICT

Physicians for Social Responsibility urges world leaders to search for a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the political stand-off in the Middle East. The potential loss of life, and the effects of the chemical weapons in the arsenals of the opposing armies are beyond imagination. Iraq has already shown its willingness to use chemical weapons, and Great Britain has threatened to use nuclear weapons. PSR calls for all nations involved in this crisis to renounce the use of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons under any circumstances.

Chemical weapons work by releasing toxic chemicals which attack the biochemical processes of living organisms. There are several kinds of chemical weapons:

- The most lethal are **nerve agents**. These weapons break down the nervous system. Victims of these weapons suffer drooling, sweating, vomiting, loss of bladder and bowel control, headache, confusion, blindness, convulsions, coma and death. Inhalation or skin contact with one drop can kill an adult. (PSR, 1989)
- **Blistering agents**, like mustard gas, are another kind of chemical weapon. Blistering agents damage the skin, eyes, and lungs. Blindness, severe burns and death can occur. Most of the chemical weapons casualties from World War I were victims of mustard gas. (PSR, 1989)
- **Choking agents** cause death by asphyxiation from pulmonary edema. Two such agents, phosgene and chlorine, were first used in World War I. (Council for a Livable World, 1989)
- Still other chemical agents, including **tear gases**, can be used to incapacitate people through tearing. Intense exposure can cause vomiting, blistering and even death. (Council for a Livable World, 1989) The U.S. does not officially consider tear gas to be a chemical weapon. These agents are sometimes used for riot control and were used by the U.S. in the Vietnam war. (PSR, 1989)

The United States, the Soviet Union and Iraq are known to have chemical weapons, and as many as 20 nations may be developing, or already capable of producing significant quantities of chemical weapons.

- The **United States** currently stockpiles around 30,000 tons of chemical weapons. About half are nerve agents, and most of the remainder is mustard gas. Currently one third is stored in munitions, and the Department of Defense states that only ten percent is usable. (Council for a Livable World, 1989)
- The **Soviet Union** has declared that its stockpile is less than 50,000 tons. (Council for a Livable World, 1989)
- The quantity of chemical weapons **Iraq** has at its disposal is unclear.

Iraq is known to have used chemical weapons against Iran, and against its own Kurdish civilians.

- The primary chemical weapon used by Iraq against the Iranians was mustard gas, although tabun, a nerve gas may have also been used. According to Iranian sources as many as 50,000 people were killed or injured by Iraqi chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war. (Center for Defense Information, 1990)
- Mustard gas, and possibly tabun, were also used against the Kurds. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of Iraqi Kurds were killed when Iraq bombed villages engaged in resistance to the Iran-Iraq war. (The Christian Science Monitor Special Report, 1988)