

## Dr. Shehriyar Khateri

*The author is a physician, and charge of the public and international relations of the Society for Chemical Weapons Victims Support (SCWVS), Iran.*

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) Saddam Hussein's regime used chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and soldiers as well as against Iraqi Kurds. As the results of those chemical attacks, about 1 million civilians and soldiers were exposed to chemical warfare agents. The international obligations are necessary but not enough to guarantee the ban of the use of inhuman weapons and to prevent war crimes.

## Questions for Dr. Khateri

While WMD hold the centre stage of international politics, its victims often suffer from neglect and insensitivity. **Dr. Shehriyar Khateri**, a physician, works determinedly for the cause of chemical weapons victim in Iran. He spoke to our Assistant Editor, **Monalisa** at Bangalore and responded to the questions via E-mail. An excerpt-

### 1. What is the NGO SCWVS about?

The Society for Chemical Weapons Victims Support (SCWVS) is a non-Governmental, non-Profit organisation, established in 2002.

The founders were a group of veterans of Iran-Iraq war who had experienced war and chemical attacks during 80s.

The SCWVS is dedicated to conducting awareness programs to increase public knowledge about the aftermath of war and weapons of mass destruction as well as about the importance of peace and the abolition of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

### 2. What is the kind of work it does?

Awareness programs through: photo exhibitions, art exhibitions, meetings and conferences.

Conducting research projects and studies in collaboration with universities and academic institutes addressing health impacts of chemical weapons, and the psychosocial problems of survivors and subsequently planning for interventions to improve quality of life and health status of them and their families.

### 3. What is your role?

I am in charge of the public and international relations of the organisation.

### 4. How does your training as medical personnel help you to deal with the subject of chemical weapons?

Indeed, as a physician I have been dealing with the long term health problems of the veterans and survivors of war, including the gas attacks survivors and I deeply understand how devastating the health consequences of war are and how necessary is to try to abolish chemical, biological and nuclear weapons from the world.

### 5. Does this training also help you in your personal interaction with the victims? In terms of building confidence etc.

Absolutely, although as a physician I am unfortunately aware of the fact that there is no cure for exposure related illnesses but we always try to help them on how to cope with their illnesses and how to improve their mental status despite their suffering.

### 6. Could you give us a brief background of the chemical weapons attack on Iran?

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) Saddam Hussein's regime used chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and soldiers as well as against Iraqi Kurds in violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. This was the most extensive use of chemical weapons since WW I and left thousands of persons killed and injured.

Seven official reports by UN expert teams during the war confirmed the use of Mustard gas and Nerve agents by Iraqi army against Iranians including: S/16433, S/17127, S/17911, S/18852, S/19823, S/20060, S/20134.

### Some of the major attacks are:

- Majnoon islands, *March 1984*—first use of nerve agent and mustard gas on a large scale.
- Sardasht, Iran, *June 28, 1987*—first mustard bombardment of civilian residential areas of a city.
- Halabja, Iraq, *March 16, 1988*—first massive nerve agent attack on civilian residential areas of a city.

As the results of those chemical attacks, about 1 million civilians and soldiers were exposed to chemical warfare agents (low dose or high dose), more than 100,000 were seriously injured and more than 6000 were killed as the direct results of the gas attacks in the battlefield.

Now 20 years on, more than 55,000 Iranians are suffering from serious long-term health effects of exposure to Mustard gas and need medical care.

### 7. What were the chemicals used in the attack?

According to Iraq, *between 1983 and 1988*—their military consumed almost 19,500 chemical bombs, over 54,000 chemical artillery shells and 27,000 short-range chemical rockets, containing 1,800 tonnes of Mustard, 140 tonnes of Tabun and over 600 tonnes of Sarin.

### 8. What were the long term effects of such attacks on the victims?

Studies of Iranian scientists' reveals that the most common long-term health effects of exposure to Mustard gas are:

- ✓ Respiratory problems including
  - Chronic Bronchitis / Bronchiolitis
  - Airways stenosis
  - Damage of the wind pipe structure (tracheomalacia)

- Recurrent lung infection
- Decreased respiratory volumes and lung function
- ✓ Eye lesions including
  - Corneal damage/melting/perforation
  - Dry eye
- ✓ Skin lesions
  - Scars
  - Dry skin
- ✓ Psychological disorders
 

According to chamber, field, and patch tests run by the US Army during the Second World War, in which over 60,000 US servicemen sustained varying degrees of exposure to mustard gas, the following specific health problems are caused by exposure to mustard agent:<sup>1</sup>

  - Respiratory cancers (nasopharyngeal, laryngeal, lung)
  - Skin cancer
  - Pigmentation abnormalities of skin
  - Chronic skin ulceration and scar formation
  - Chronic respiratory diseases (asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—COPD, laryngitis)
  - Eye problems (recurrent corneal ulcerative disease, delayed recurrent keratitis of the eye, chronic conjunctivitis)
  - Bone marrow depression and immunosuppression as an acute effect.
  - Psychological disorders (mood disorders, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, other traumatic stress disorders).
  - Sexual dysfunction due to scarring the reason for these effects can be traced to the alkylating effects of mustard: Mustard agents are DNA- alkylating agents and are extremely cytotoxic at low doses. DNA alkylation CBW is probably responsible for the mutagenicity of mustard agents. These agents also alkylate RNA and proteins and can, at moderate to high doses, produce non repairable DNA lesions (genotoxicity).

## 9. What could be certain preventive measure against a chemical weapon attack?

There is no certain prevention measure but when a chemical weapons attack or threat happens, the most important things to be considered are: improving defence measures, increasing public knowledge and training programs, protection equipments, medical countermeasures casualty management and decontamination.

## 10. Do you think that the international community has not handled the chemical weapons victims of Iran with sensitivity?

As mentioned earlier, Following Iranian allegations that Iraq was using chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988, the UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, sent a number of specialist teams to investigate the situation. Although the war was still in progress the team visited battlefields and medical centers, met with casualties and took samples from contaminated materials, including unexploded bombs. Their reports raised awareness of the shocking use of chemical weapons by Iraq. Since the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi regime was in clear violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and given that the UN expert missions unanimously concluded that chemical warfare agents had indeed been used, the UN Security Council should have taken immediate strong action to stop such activities. It was its responsibility to do so.

Due to its lack of such action, Saddam Hussein's regime continued, with impunity, to use even greater quantities of chemical warfare agents on a larger scale, against both soldiers and civilians.

Therefore, there is no doubt that the international community including the United Nations and the Security council failed to fulfill their responsibility to try to stop the violation to International Humanitarian law and a big war crime which caused the death and suffering of tens of thousands of people.

**11. What is the link between Biological, chemical and toxic weapons?**

Both are known as so called Weapons of Mass Destruction as they are indiscriminate weapons and they have a nature of causing superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering.

**12. What are the new and emerging chemical weapons?**

Although at the moment 183 countries are member states of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and it has been stipulated in the CWC that development, production, stockpiling and the use of chemical weapons are prohibited moreover the states parties which have stockpiles of chemical weapons must destroy their CW arsenals by 2012, but unfortunately there are still a few states which are neither member of CWC nor many other disarmament treaties and are real threats to the world peace, they not only have huge arsenals of CW but still developing more dangerous Chemical and Biological agents which can be used by themselves or terrorist groups and may cause a disaster for the world.

**13. In terms of their lethality and after effects how would you rate chemical weapons in the category of WMD?**

I am not going to say that chemical weapons are the most dangerous types of so called WMD but I would rather say that having a strong international

treaty for total ban of such weapons (CW) urging all member states to eliminate these inhuman weapons and not to use chemical weapons under any circumstances is an indicator that the world community has considered chemical weapons as the most dangerous types of WMD as we do not have such obligations about other kind of weapons even Nuclear and Biological weapons!

**14. What do you think are the reasons that chemical weapons are used in war fighting and against civilians?**

Simply, lack of respect to international law and the rules which are created to save the human being from the crimes against humanity and to protect human dignity.

**15. How effective is the moral norm against the use of inhumane weapons?**

Lessons learnt from the disastrous events of 1980s and the violation of Saddam's regime to many principles of international humanitarian law including the 1925 Geneva protocol reveals that the international obligations are necessary but not enough to guarantee the ban of the use of inhuman weapons and to prevent war crimes.

When Saddam's regime was using chemical weapons against Iranians in a large scale and was gassing even civilians, the world community just turned a blind eye and let him to gas more people.

Even those nations which are always known as sensitive nations about the war crimes and violation to international law, did not react and forgot about the international law, so Saddam's regime killed more people with impunity.

Since Saddam was an ally of big powers then and he was using inhuman weapons against a country which was considered as an enemy of certain countries, it was O.K. but later even suspicions that he may have WMD arsenals justified a full scale military invasion to Iraq in violation of the UN charter! And even using inhuman weapons like Depleted Uranium (DU) weapons.

**16. What is the role of global politics in the issue of chemical weapons?**

Not to use the CWC and other international treaties as tools for the sake of interests of big powers but to respect them as the basic rules of humanity and justice.

**17. Do you see a similarity of chemical weapons victims in Iran with the victims of Bhopal Gas tragedy in India in 1984?**

Although Bhopal gas tragedy was an industrial accident and what happened in Iran was a war crime but there are similarities:

1. Both survivors developed chronic health problem and many are still suffering from disabling illnesses related to exposure to toxic chemicals.
2. Both survivors are also suffering from being ignored, they were (and still they are) forgotten by the world community, the perpetrators were not tried in a fair trial and were not punished as they should be.

**18. Is there an International law that provides relief and compensation to chemical weapon victim and punishes the perpetrators?**

Use of chemical weapons is clearly a violation of International Humanitarian Law and it was the responsibility of international

community to react against the grave breach of International Humanitarian Law and war crimes that Saddam committed during its war with Iran.

**19. Are there any compensatory claims for a chemical weapon's victim?**

Unfortunately, nobody was ever tried for the war crimes of the use of chemical weapons against Iranians, this was even excluded from the list of Saddam's charges in his trial and he was not given the chance to speak about his atrocities against Iranians and about those who supplied chemical weapons and its precursors for his regime.

No international tribunal was set up to address the war crimes of Saddam during his invasion to Iran including the use of chemical weapons. The victims of chemical weapons attacks have never received any compensation for their suffering because of the abovementioned reasons.

**20. What course of action and relief can chemical weapons victims claim for?**

First of all they need to be recognised by the world community as victim of a war crime.

Secondly they need international contribution by world medical community to help them to cope with their chronic, progressive illnesses.

Third, they seek justice; they need the perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks to be punished and those who supported Saddam's regime to be tried in a fair international tribunal.

**21. Has this work with chemical weapon's victim affected you personally?**

Undoubtedly, witnessing the suffering of CW victims and living with them,

dealing with the long lasting health effects and serious psychological impacts of such weapons makes me more determined to do my best to prevent the repeat of such disasters and to promote culture of peace.

**22. Do you think enough is being done in terms of Treaty, Conventions at the international level to prevent chemical weapons use?**

I believe that the existing Chemical weapons convention is strong enough in terms of its legal aspects to ban the development, production, stockpiling and the use of chemical weapons in an international level.

**23. What are the efforts that can be undertaken to prevent the proliferation of chemical weapons?**

First, Putting pressure on those states which have not signed and ratified the CWC yet, to join the convention as soon as possible and to help the universality of the convention.

Second, putting pressure on those states which have not fulfilled their commitment regarding the destruction of their chemical arsenals based on the CWC obligations.

**24. What more needs to be done?**

Awareness! Awareness! Awareness! To make people aware of the danger of such devastating weapons and to recall them the human tragedy of WWI and Iran-Iraq War.

The survivors of 1980s chemical attacks are still alive and they are a witnesses of the most recent large scale use of Chemical weapons, their eye witness accounts are the best awareness messages, their chronic coughs, their skin scars and their burnt eyes have powerful messages to everybody: Never again!

**25. Any other issue or question that has not been mentioned before and you would like to talk about.**

Whilst talking about the chemical weapons convention, don't forget the victims!

**References**

1. Pechura, Constance M., and David P. Rall, editors. *Veterans at Risk: The Health Effects of Mustard Gas and Lewisite*. Committee to Survey the Health Effects of Mustard Gas and Lewisite. Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Institute of Medicine. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1993, pp. 216-7.