

Chemical Weapons in Sri Lanka

Ms. Gulbin Sultana

The author is a Research Assistant at the IDSA, New Delhi.

Summary

While the Sri Lankan Government and security forces have confirmed the possession of chemical weapons by the LTTE, it is very difficult to verify the actual use of such weapons. However, there are occasional media reports available of LTTE's chemical attack.

During the Eelam Wars in Sri Lanka, there was considerable concern about the use of chemical weapons. Allegedly, both the LTTE and Sri Lankan army had possessed such weapons. However, no strong evidence of the use of chemical weapons during the war has been found yet.

Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the LTTE

According to Prof. Peter Chalk, a leading expert on Tamil Tiger's strategies, LTTE is the first known terrorist group to use chemical weapons.¹ The then Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka said in 2007 that his Government had evidence that the LTTE had plans to use chemical weapons against the Sri Lankan security forces.² Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona also confirmed that the government had found evidence that the LTTE were seeking to buy thermobaric weapons and launchers. In addition, during the Eelam wars, Sri Lankan security forces detected that the tigers were transporting large quantities of acid. The Sri Lankan Military had also reported capture of a large stock of gas masks and chemical resistant costumes from an LTTE camp at Udayarkattukulam in the Mullaithivu district in the north.³

While the Sri Lankan Government and security forces have confirmed the possession of chemical weapons by the LTTE, it is very difficult to verify the actual use of such weapons. However, there are occasional media reports available of LTTE's chemical attack. It was reported that LTTE used locally manufactured chemicals to attack Sri Lankan Army's Kiran camp at Trincomalee in 1990.⁴ However, the Sri Lankan Government in power during that period did not take the issue seriously and also did not make any effort to inform the

international community. Allegedly, the LTTE again used thermobaric rockets in a 2005 attack that killed thirteen sailors, leaving bodies burned beyond recognition.

The chemical weapons possessed by the LTTE were locally manufactured as well as acquired from foreign countries. Reportedly, LTTE had a toxicological laboratory housed in two floor underground in the jungles of Vanni. The underground laboratory was protected by three storied building above-ground. “Pro-LTTE Sri Lankan chemical experts and engineers who worked in Western countries are said to be the brains behind the building of the lab as well as the toxicological products”.⁵

It was also suspected that a West European country closely aligned with the LTTE might have provided the chemical weapons to the LTTE via another East European country under a bi-lateral agreement with that country with special secret instructions for onward shipment to Vanni. It is interesting that according to a media report of November 2005, the foreign power which provided the chemical weapons to the LTTE had obtained an assurance from the Tigers that they would not use these weapons against the Sri Lankan Armed Forces.⁶ They were basically meant for destroying the cadres of the breakaway rebel group led by Colonel Karuna in Eastern Sri Lanka.⁷

Minimum loss to its cadres was the main objective of the LTTE to use the chemical weapons. After the LTTE was thrown out of Jaffna in 1995, it was planning to launch a major assault on Jaffna. Anticipating a heavy loss of manpower, LTTE adopted a new strategy of immobilising the Sri Lankan forces through chemical weapons before a counter-offensive could be launched. But there are examples when this technique backfired as according to Prof. Peter Chalk, the LTTE used a chemical weapon to attach

an army camp in one of its early offensive, but it backfired because the winds brought most of it back and deposited the chemical on the LTTE side.⁸

Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the Sri Lankan Army

There are serious apprehensions that thermobaric bomb - a bomb that uses a fuel-air explosive capable of creating overpressures equal to an atomic bomb – was used by the Sri Lankan Army during the Eelam War 4.⁹ Sri Lankan army reportedly had acquired the Russian RPO-A rockets in 2001 via a British company, Gladstone Industrial Holdings.

A petition, which was sent to Mr. Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General; Respected Ms Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India and Heads of Government of South Asian Countries, sought independent verification of the use of such weapons. The petition said,

“it is very important that the truth about the actual use of these ‘weapons of mass destruction’ including thermobaric bombs be independently verified and its source of supply identified. If indeed these horrific weapons have been used, the international community should immediately initiate prosecution of the highest functionaries of the Sri Lankan state and the Government of the country that supplied these bombs for commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.”¹⁰

UN Expert Panel Report on Accountability in Sri Lanka had also presented the allegation of Sri Lankan Army using cluster bomb munitions or white phosphorous or other chemical substances against civilians during the war. Since the panel was not able

to reach to any conclusion regarding their credibility, it recommended further investigation into this allegation.¹¹ The Sri Lankan Government refused to conduct any such investigation and on the contrary, it regularly tries to silent anybody who wants to initiate any independent investigation into this matter. According to the wife of Prageeth Ekneligoda, the political columnist and cartoonist who has been missing since 24 January, 2010, the main reason for his disappearance is an investigation he carried out on the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Sri Lanka forces in 2008.¹²

It is very difficult to validate the media reports on either LTTE or the Sri Lankan Armed forces. As a party to the chemical Weapons Convention¹³, Sri Lankan Government has officially denied having such weapons. It is noteworthy that in a chemical warfare, user also needs to adopt precautionary measures. Precautionary measures adopted by the Sri Lankan Army when they came to know about the possession of such weapons by the LTTE were as follows;

- Alerted regional and international intelligence agencies and media
- Used more camouflage for constructing bunkers etc. to avoid detection
- Frontline troops (especially attacking troops) were equipped with Oxygen gas masks.
- Advance dressing stations (ADS), front most medical installation were provided medical drugs etc. for burning injuries etc.

LTTE's reactions to the Possession of Chemical Weapons by the Sri Lankan Army were;

- Warned the Chandrika Kumaratunga government of disastrous consequences

if it inducted the recently acquired weapons with chemical warheads into the north-eastern theatre of war.¹⁴

- Called upon the concerned nations of the international community, particularly the United States, Britain, European Union and India to condemn Sri Lanka for the acquisition of weapons with chemical warheads and to impress upon the Sinhala Government the detrimental effects of their use in the Tamil homeland.

Conclusion

It can be argued that despite the possibility of occasional use of chemical weapons, Sri Lanka is not assuming a high threat from chemical weapons. The weapons reportedly used during the Eelam wars were very primary. According to Sri Lankan Army, most of the chemical weapons found from the LTTE have already been destroyed. The remaining ones are in Army's armouries for which army maintain several strict regulations and procedures to keep account of them so that they don't fall in the wrong hands.

Endnotes:

¹ "Tamil Tigers ready to attack Sri Lankan forces with toxic weapons", *Asian Tribune*, July 12, 2006, accessed on 9 November 2011, available at <http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/1034>

² "LTTE Ready to Use Chemical Weapons: PM", *The Times of India*, September 6, 2007, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-09-06/rest-of-world/27954292_1_ltte-chemical-weapons-sri-lanka-s-tamil-tigers

³ B. Muralidhar Reddy, "Sri Lankan Army finds chemical warfare equipment", *The Hindu*, March 13, 2009, accessed on 2 November 2011, available at <http://www.hindu.com/2009/03/13/stories/2009031354791300.htm>

- ⁴ “Air Force More Than Matches New Tiger Weapon”, *The Nation*, September 29, 2008 Accessed on 10 November 2011, available at http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2008/9/32965_space.html
- ⁵ Tamil Tigers ready to attack Sri Lankan forces with toxic weapons”, *Asian Tribune*, July 12, 2006, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at <http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/1034>
- ⁶ “Acquisition of Nerve gas and other Lethal Chemical Weapons by the LTTE”, *The Asian Tribune*, November 21, 2005, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at <http://www.asiantribune.com/acquisition-nerve-gas-and-other-lethal-chemical-weapons>
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ “Tamil Tigers Ready to Attack Sri Lankan Forces with Toxic Weapons”, *The Asian Tribune*, July 12, 2006, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at <http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/1034>.
- ⁹ Hambling, David, “Thermobaric Slaughter in Sri Lanka?”, May 1, 2009, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2009/05/thermobaric-slaughter-in-sri-lanka/>.
- ¹⁰ “Appeal on Sri Lanka by concerned South Asia citizens”, 10 April 2009, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at http://transcurrents.com/tc/2009/04/_appeal_on_sri_lanka_by_concer.html
- ¹¹ “Report of the Secretary General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka”, March 31, 2011, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/POE_Report_Full.pdf
- ¹² “Prageeth missing due to ‘chemical weapon probe”, January 28, 2011, accessed on 6 November 2011, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2011/01/110128_prageeth_galle.shtml
- ¹³ Sri Lanka signed and ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention on the January 14, 1993 and August 19, 1994 respectively. The Ministry of Industry and Commerce is the national Authority responsible for the implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention in Sri Lanka which also functions as the lead agency in case of chemical emergencies in the country.
- ¹⁴ LTTE came out with the following Press Release on 16 August 2001: “We are perturbed over reports that the Sri Lanka government has purchased new infantry weapon system with chemical warheads. This Russian made rocket propelled ‘thermobaric’ weapon is internationally banned for its lethal toxic effects on combatants and civilians. The acquisition of this banned weapon by Sri Lanka marks a new and dangerous escalation of the armed conflict in the island.”, Thermobaric Warfare and Humanitarian Concerns, D. B. S. Jayaraj, 19 August 2001, Accessed on 6 November 2011, available at http://www.sangam.org/A_N_A_L_Y_S_I_S_-_A_R_C_H_I_V_E_S/Jeyaraj_8_20_01.htm