United States of America: Chemical Weapons Profile

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Summary

During the First World War, the United States stockpiled and used chemical weapons against Germany. However during World War II, President Roosevelt announced no-first-use policies. Chemical weapons were not used by either the United States or its allies in this war. During the early phase of cold war, the United States experimented to develop a wide range of incapacitating chemical agents and weapons. But in the late 1970s, President Nixon unilaterally renounced the first use of chemical weapons and halted the production of chemical weapons. The United States ratified the Geneva Protocol which banned the use of chemical and biological weapons on January 22, 1975. The United States also ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention which came into force in April 1997. According to the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency as on July, 2009, the United States has destroyed more than 60% of the original stockpile. However, reports noted that as of April 2009, some 12,600 tons of the original 31,500 tons of blister and nerve agents remain to be destroyed.

Chemical weapons make premeditated use of the toxic properties of chemical substances to inflict death or harm to human beings and are known as weapons of mass destruction along with Nuclear and Biological weapons.[1] The United States was part of Hague Conventions which were held in 1899 and 1907. Hague Conventions banned aerial bombings and use of chemical warfare among other initiatives. The United States Army Chemical Materials Agency sources reveal that during the First World War, the United States started stockpiling chemical weapons and used its chemical weapons against Germany. The United States also deployed weapons produced by the French. However after the World War I, the United States signed the Washington Naval Treaty, also known as Five-Power Treaty on February 6, 1922 along with the British Empire, the Japanese empire, the French third republic as well as the kingdom of Italy. This treaty aimed at banning chemical weapons but could not succeed as the French rejected it. Subsequently, the continued stockpile of chemical weapons of the United States exceeded to 30,000 tons.

A no-first-use policy was announced by US President Roosevelt during World War II. But Roosevelt asserted retaliation of its kind in the case of any use of chemical agents against it.[2] However during this war, chemical weapons were not used by the United States or its allies. Though, an accident occurred in 1943 at the port of Bari in Southern Italy when Germans attacked the port on December 2, which resulted in destroying and sinking of several American ships including its World War II cargo ship 'John Harvey'. It was carrying a hidden cargo of M41-A1 100 lb mustard gas bombs to the Mediterranean theatre as approved by US President Roosevelt in August 1943 since he had pledged of in kind retaliation in the event of attack on the allies by chemical weapons. John Harvey was chosen to pass on the shipment of mustard gas to Italy which was to be held in reserve as there were fears that Hitler could use poison gas to redress the strategic balance.[3] However, the presence of the mustard gas bombs on the ship was highly classified information and authorities were not aware of it. According to the United States

military account, after the attack, sixty nine Americans lost their lives caused by exposure and immersion as the ship blew up.[4] But the presence of mustard gas in the Port of Bari incident was kept secret at that time and even many years after of war. [5]

Development or stockpiling of chemical weapons was not halted even after the end of World War II. According to a Staff report prepared for the Committee on Veterans' Affairs in the United States Senate in 1994, thousands of American soldiers were exposed to chemical warfare agents during cold war testing programms as well as in accidents."[6]

During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experimented to develop a wide range of incapacitating chemical agents such as psycho-behavioral, non-lethal including lysergic acid diethylamide intended at effective mind control. These chemicals agents included marijuana derivatives, tranquilizers such as ketamine or fentanyl, as well as a number of glycolate anticholinergics. 3-quinuclidinyl benzilate was one of the anticholinergic compounds, which was a military incapacitating agent. It was given a code name 'BZ' by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The BZ was developed as weapon in the early 1960s for battlefield use. It was alleged that American troops used BZ as a counter-insurgency weapon during the Vietnam War though United States maintained that it was never used."[7]

Finally, on November 25, 1969, the United States President Richard Nixon declared unilateral renouncement of the first use of chemical weapons.[8] According to the US Army sources, a unilateral decree was issued by Nixon to halt the production and transport of chemical weapons. During the period of 1967-70, the United States launched a destruction process known as Operation CHASE under which disposal of chemical weapons was carried out by sinking ships laden with chemical weapons in the Atlantic Ocean. The United States embarked on the research to invent safer disposal methods for chemical weapons in the 1970s. According to the U.S. Army Chemical Material Agency, the United States disposed of several thousand tons of mustard gas by incineration at Rocky Mountain Arsenal and nearly 4,200 tons of nerve agents by chemical neutralization at Tooele Army Depot and Rocky Mountain Arsenal."[9] On January 22, 1975, the United States ratified the Geneva Protocol of 1925 which prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons. The ratification of Geneva Protocol by the United States took place after several decades of deliberations as it was signed on June 17, 1925.

During the 1980s, the United States started stockpile reductions drive with destroying its entire stock of BZ beginning in 1988 as well as by removing its some outdated munitions. The destruction process of chemical agents at Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System began in June 1990.

In 1986, United States President Ronald Reagan entered into an agreement with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, aimed at removal of the United States stockpile of chemicals weapons from Germany. In July 1990, under the Operation Steel Box, two ships carrying over 100,000 shells containing GB and VX. These shells had been taken from United States army's depots such as FSTS (Forward Storage/ Transportation Sites and Miesau. These shells were transported from Bremerhaven Germany to Johnston Atoll in the Pacific in a 46-day nonstop journey.[10]

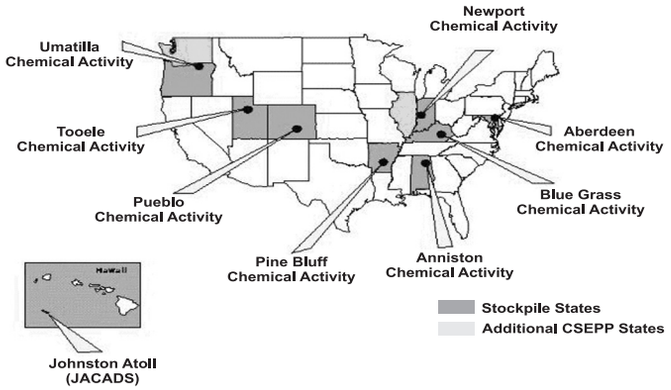
The United States President H.W. Bush and then Soviet Union President Mikhaiel Gorbachev signed an "Agreement on Destruction and Non-production of Chemical Weapons and on Measures to Facilitate the Multilateral Convention on Banning Chemical Weapons" on June 1, 1990. The agreement required the destruction of Chemical Weapons stockpiles down to no more than 5,000 agent tons each by December 31, 2002, beginning in 1992.[11]

In May 1991, United States President George H.W. Bush expressed commitment to destroy all its chemical weapons. The Chemical Weapons Convention was signed by the United States in 1993. The United States ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention on April 26, 1997. According to the convention, by April 2012, all the chemical weapon agents, its

dispersal systems as well as production centers and facilities should be destroyed. The CWC banned the possession of most of the chemical weapons, chemical weapons development. It also required the destruction of existing stockpiles, precursor chemicals, production facilities and weapon delivery systems.[12] By 2007, the United States had been successful in destroying only 45% of its total stockpile of chemical weapons.

According to the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency sources by July 2009, 63% of the original stockpile of the United States which is approximately 31,100 metric tons (30,609 long tons) of nerve and mustard agents declared in 1997 has been destroyed.[13] By 2007, 13,996 metric tons of prohibited weapons were destroyed in order to meet the Phase III quota and deadline. In the Phase III, the original commitment required that all countries would destroy 45 percent of the chemical stockpiles by April 2004. Realising the improbability to meet this deadline, the George W. Bush administration, in September 2003, requested for new deadline until December 2007 for the Phase III. Bush administration also announced a probable requirement for an extension until April 2012 for Phase IV. These extension procedures are spelled out in the convention. Yet, the latest date allowed by the treaty is April 2012. However, it was pointed out by the United States that it may not be possible to meet this deadline considering environmental challenges as well as the United States decision to first destroy the leaking individual chemical shells and then bulk storage chemical weapons.[14]

The following map prepared by the Henry L. Stimson Center depicts the chemical weapon storage sites existing in the United States. As shown in the map, these facilities are Umatilla Chemical Activity in Oregon, Pueblo Chemical Activity in Colorado, Blue Grass Army Activity in Kentucky, Anniston Chemical Activity in Alabama, Pine Bluff Chemical Activity in Arkansas and Tooele Chemical Activity in Utah, Aberdeen Chemical Activity in Maryland, Newport Chemical Activity in Indiana and one located outside of the Continental US on Johnston Atoll."[15] The United States also has a Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program (CSEPP) in all these states having chemical activities. The goal of CSEPP is to develop and enhance the emergency preparedness capabilities in the event of a chemical accident at the chemical activity centers. Two additional states, Washington and Illinois also participate in the CSEPP as of their borders are in proximity to the stockpiles storage facilities in Indiana and Oregon, respectively.[16] The map also depicts these two additional CSEPP states.



Source: The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington D.C. at http://www.stimson.org/cbw/?sn=CB20011220125

Chemical Weapons Storage Sites in the United States

According to a report of Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, as of April 2009, some 12,600 tons of the original 31,500 tons of blister and nerve agents are yet to be destroyed and the program continues to lag far behind schedule.[17]

However, commenting on the status of chemical weapons in the United States on December 3, 2009, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Chemical and Biological Defence Programs Andrew C. Weber said that till date the United states has destroyed 67.6 percent of its Category 1 chemical weapons, which includes 85.3 percent of chemical rockets, 96.6 percent of nerve agent and destruction of all the binary chemical weapons. The United States has destroyed all of its Category 3 chemical weapons and all former chemical weapons

production facilities. Assistant Secretary Weber noted that the United States has provided an estimated 20.5 billion dollars for the destruction of chemical weapons.[18] The Obama administration appears committed to expedite the chemical weapons destruction process.

Endnotes:

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