

## Myanmar

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### Summary

Despite being a signatory to various anti-WMD forums and conventions, since 1980s, Myanmar has been allegedly involved in the manufacture, storage and even usage of chemical as well as biological weapons. Although such allegations are yet to be confirmed, instances have been cited by human rights groups from time to time when Myanmar junta has reportedly resorted to the use of chemical weapons while dealing with ethnic minorities and local rebel groups, such as Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), etc. So far, Myanmar's ruling junta has vehemently denied its involvement in any clandestine chemical weapon programme. Due to lack of adequate evidence, international community has not been able to take proper action against the junta in this regard. Still, the international organizations, particularly the UN, should take the responsibility of conducting thorough investigation of this issue by its very own UN Organization or the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar has consistently taken stance against all kinds of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It has been a signatory to various international protocols and conventions against biological as well as chemical weapons, including the 1925 Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare; the 1972 Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxic Weapons Convention; and Chemical Weapons Convention or CWC (1993). Still, allegations have been made against Myanmar from time to time for its involvement in the manufacture, storage and usage of biological and chemical weapons. So far, such allegations have not been confirmed though.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its early accession to the CWC, Myanmar has not been able to ratify it till today. It has aroused suspicion among many regarding Myanmar's dubious intention of acquiring a stockpile of chemical weapons. In fact, since 1980s, with the apparent establishment of the clandestine chemical weapons plant by the Ne Win regime, Myanmar and its ambition for chemical weapons has been an issue of debate.<sup>2</sup> A US Navy Intelligence Report (1991) prepared by Adm. Thomas A. Brooks indicating Myanmar as part of the fourteen nations outside the Soviet Union and NATO which might be in the possession of chemical weapons, aggravated the issue further.<sup>3</sup> More recently, in 2005, Belgian photojournalist Thierry Falise's interaction with two deserters of Myanmar Army also reportedly revealed Myanmar's possible engagement in a clandestine chemical weapon programme.<sup>4</sup> However, such reports regarding Myanmar's violation of the CWC are yet to be confirmed.

As mentioned earlier, allegations regarding Myanmar's involvement in chemical weapon programme can be traced back to early 1980s. In 1982, the then Burma Socialist Programme Party or BSSP dictatorship (which has been replaced by the current State Peace and Development Council or SPDC) was alleged by the *International Defence Review* for its usage of chemical weapon. Couple of years later, a US

Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) claimed that Myanmar was assisted by Germany and Italy to develop chemical weapon of its own by the end of 1984. All these allegations were somehow substantiated by an article published in *The Bangkok Post* on February 1, 1984 which mentioned about an incident in which Myanmar troops fired mortar and artillery shells which emitted 'toxic gas' at anti-government Karenni rebels along the Burma-Thai border.

The possibility of Myanmar having a clandestine chemical weapon programme was reiterated by US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1988 and 1992. A US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) survey conducted in 1992 also offered a similar conclusion. While taking a step further, the survey named North Korea and China to be the possible suppliers who assisted Myanmar in setting up its chemicals stockpile. It was further reported that to deal with its lack of delivery system that could reach remote regions, in early 1990s itself, Myanmar looked for surface-to-air missiles capable of carrying chemicals.<sup>5</sup>

Over the years, Myanmar has been allegedly involved in using chemical weapons against its own natives, particularly the ethnic minorities. In this context, various instances have been cited so far. In 1992, Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw) was accused of violating the CWC by using chemical weapons during their prolonged offensive against the Karenni rebel strongholds at Manerplaw. While reporting that incident in its report titled "Is the SLORC using Bacteriological Warfare?" (February 1994), Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) stated that due to the suspected usage of chemical weapons by the Army, several Karenni soldiers suffered from burns and rashes for months. Many of them also lost partial or complete loss of mobility in various parts of their body.<sup>6</sup>

In July 1992, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) from north Burma was allegedly attacked by the Army with chemical weapons. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) reportedly intercepted a radio message from SLORC<sup>7</sup> which instructed its troops to withdraw 300 meters from the frontline shortly before the release of the chemical weapon shells by the Air Force on the KIA positions.

In February 1995, during its fight against the Karen National Unit (KNU) at Kaw Moo Rah, Myanmar Army allegedly resorted to the usage to chemical weapons once again. Karenni force reportedly had to withdraw from their position after the attack as the 'chemical shells' caused dizziness, nausea, vomiting, burning, and even unconsciousness.<sup>8</sup> This allegation of chemical weapon use was later on reiterated by an article titled "Burmese admit They Used Chemicals to Fight Karens" published in a Thai language newspaper- *Daily News*. The article particularly mentions about Secretary-2 of SLORC, Lieutenant General Tin Oo's meeting with Thai Army Commander Wimol Wongwanich in Thailand after the Kaw Moo Rah incident. During their interaction, Oo reportedly revealed to Wongwanich that although the use of chemicals against the Karen rebels was not right, it was necessary as they were engaged in anti-government activities.<sup>9</sup>

In 2005, the Myanmar Army was yet again accused of using chemical weapons against the Karen rebel force. In its report titled "The Issue of Chemical Weapons Use by the Military Junta", Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), an international human rights group, mentioned about an incident on February 15, 2005 when the Army used chemicals containing mustard gas on the Karenni force at Nya My area. According to the report, within minutes of the chemical explosion, the rebel soldiers suffered from irritation to the eyes, throat, lungs and skin. Many of them reportedly also developed severe muscle weakness and coughed up blood. After assessing the symptoms of the affected Karenni soldiers following the attack, Dr. Martin Panther, a physician by profession and also the President of the CSW, concluded that the symptoms of the Karenni soldiers and the description of the device with which they were attacked basically established the fact that the Army attacked the rebel force with some sort of chemical weapon.<sup>10</sup>

So far, Myanmar's ruling junta has vehemently denied allegations of ever using chemical weapons.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it maintains that Myanmar simply does not possess such weapon. However, the junta's claim was somewhat nullified by two young SPDC defectors, who during their

interview with BBC correspondent in Myanmar, revealed that they themselves carried chemical weapons to the frontline. They were reportedly warned by their superior officer to be cautious while carrying such weapon as, if dropped accidentally, the chemicals could cause serious health problems, and even death.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, in August 2009, during its clash with Kokang rebels, the Myanmar army was accused of using chemical mortars once again. The clash reportedly forced the rebels to withdraw from Shan state and take refuge in neighbouring China.<sup>13</sup> Following that incident, reports started pouring in about the Army's similar intention in dealing with other ethnic ceasefire groups, such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), etc. Anticipating such a step against them in the future, both these groups have reportedly purchased thousands of protective suits already.<sup>14</sup>

Although Myanmar Army's possible involvement in resorting to the use of chemical weapons indeed create a horrifying picture of the future ahead, so far, the international community has not been able to take a step against the ruling junta due to lack of adequate evidence. Still, we need to be cautious of the fact that all the incidents cited so far concerning the use of chemical weapons indicate a pattern of Myanmar's continued manufacture and use of certain weapons which seemed to be quite identical to the chemical weapons. If the allegations against the Myanmar army proved true in the future, it would not only bring out in the open Myanmar's violation of the CWC, it would also show to the world the junta's lack of regard towards international norms and treaties. From now onwards, instead of taking a backseat on such issue, the international community, particularly the UN should take adequate action in conducting investigation and intervention by the UN Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Meanwhile it should also be ensured that such events do not repeat themselves in Myanmar in the future.

## Endnotes:

1. "Myanmar Special Weapons," Global Security.org, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/myanmar/index.html> (accessed on April 23, 2010).
2. Ibid.
3. Michael Wines, "After the War: Chemical Arms: Navy report asserts Many Nations Seek or have Poison Gas", The New York Times, March 10, 1991. (accessed on April 23, 2010).
4. "Burmese junta uses chemical weapons", The Sunday Times, May 8, 2005, (accessed on August 9, 2009).
5. Alan Boyd, "Myanmar aims for missiles and misses", Asia Times, available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/printN.html>. (accessed on April 23, 2010).
6. "Is the SLORC using Bacteriological Warfare?", Preliminary Report of KHRG, March 15, 1994, available at [http://www.khrg.org/khrg94/94\\_03\\_15.html](http://www.khrg.org/khrg94/94_03_15.html) (accessed on April 23, 2010).
7. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLOC) was formed after Burmese Armed Force's seizure of state power following the crushing of the 'Four Eights Uprising'. SLORC was basically a cosmetic replacement of Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSSP). In 1997, SLORC was abolished and replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). SPDC is the current official name of the military regime in Burma/Myanmar.
8. "Is the SLORC using Bacteriological Warfare?".
9. "Chemical Shells at Kaw Moo Rah", A Special independent Report by the KHRG, February 24, 1995, available at <http://www.khrg.org/khrg95/khrg9508.html>. (accessed on April 23, 2010).
10. "They're at it Again; Recent reports of the SPDC's Chemical Weapons Use Consistent with evidence presented in Past KHRG Repots", May 3, 2005, available at <http://www.khrg.org/khrg2005/khrg05b4.html>. (accessed on April 23, 2010).
11. "Burma 'used chemicals on rebels'", BBC News, April 21, 2005, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4467471.stm>. (accessed on April 21, 2010).
12. "Defected soldiers say Burmese army has chemical weapons", BBC Burmese.com, May 8, 2005, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/>

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14. "Ethnic armies preparing for chemical attack", December 25, 2009, available at <http://www.shaneabraahams.com/2009/12/ethnic-armies-preparing-for-chemical-attack/>. (accessed on April 23, 2010).