

Chemical Weapons Profile of Angola

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Summary

Angola, a country in southern Africa, which has no officially confirmed history of possession and use of chemical weapons by the state. However, it should be noted that South Africa, in defence of its earlier chemical and biological weapons programme, often cited the capture of chemical detection and decontamination equipment and treatment systems in Angola. There were instances of chemical weapons being used inside Angola when it was under Portuguese colonial rule.

The year 2012 signifies the 15th anniversary of the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), an international agreement that prohibits all activities related to development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and promotes timely destruction of existing stockpile.¹ With 188 state parties, which translate into 98 percent of the world's population, the Convention is one of the most successful international treaties with near universal membership. Only a handful of countries did not accede to the convention. These countries are Angola, Egypt, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria, which have neither signed nor ratified the Convention; and Israel and Myanmar which have signed but not ratified the treaty. On the other hand, during the 17th session of the Conference of the States Parties (CSP) to the CWC, held in November 2012 at The Hague, Netherlands, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated that "if a world free of chemical weapons is to be fully realised, it is crucial that these eight states join without delay".² Since the third Five-Year Review Conference of the States Parties to the Convention is scheduled to be held in April 2013 in The Hague, it is appropriate to study the case of Angola.

Use of Chemical Weapons in Angola

Angola, a country in southern Africa, has no officially confirmed history of possession and use of chemical weapons by the state. However, it should be noted that South Africa, in defence of its earlier chemical and biological weapons programme, often cited the capture of chemical detection and decontamination equipment and treatment systems in Angola during the 1980s as concrete evidence to argue that the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and Cuban forces were prepared to

use chemical weapons against the then South African Defence Force (SADF). South Africa also claimed that the Western European Defence Alliance (WEDA) endorsed a chemical attack on the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) by the MPLA.

Historically, there were instances of chemical weapons being used inside Angola when it was under Portuguese colonial rule. It was reported that on May 1, 1970, the Portuguese began chemical warfare against the people of Angola by spraying chemical defoliants and herbicides over the cultivated areas of “liberated regions” in Angola, thereby destroying the harvest and killing hundreds of people.³ Some of those chemicals used by the Portuguese included:

- 2, 4-D (2, 4 dichlorophenoxyacetic acid),
- 2, 4, 5-T (2, 4, 5 trichlorophenoxyacetic acid),
- Cocadylic acid, and
- Picloram.⁴

These chemicals are highly poisonous and were known to cause digestive problems, the vomiting up of blood, and respiratory diseases. Particularly, the chemical 2, 4, 5 trichlorophenoxyacetic acid acts on pregnant women, causing congenital malformation; Cocadylic acid contains arsenic and is used as a lethal dose; and Picloram is so toxic that in a test conducted in a Puerto Rican equatorial forest, trees sprayed with Picloram remained without leaves for over two years. Strongly opposing the use of chemicals by Portugal against Angola, the then president of the MPLA, Agostinho Neto, appealed to U Thant, the then Secretary General of the United Nations to condemn Portugal’s resort to chemical warfare against the people fighting for independence.⁵

Immediately after achieving independence in November 1975, Angola slipped into a civil war that continued until 2002. The civil war was primarily a struggle for power between two former liberation movements, the MPLA and the UNITA, supported by opposing camps during the Cold War period.⁶ Hence, the civil war witnessed sporadic intervention with chemical weapons by major powers of opposing camps. For example, an investigation by the UN and the World Health Organisation found that during the 1978 “mass murders at Kassinga” in Angola, conducted by the South African Special Forces, victims were paralysed with gas before they were shot dead.⁷

At the same time, there was evidence to suggest that the MPLA government in Angola used chemical weapons, acquired from the Cubans, and backed by Russian and the erstwhile East German supporters, in counter-insurgency operations during the 1980s. Brig Isidro Peregrino Chindondo, the intelligence chief of the UNITA, complained that the Soviet-aided government troops used chemical weapons in the civil war, which killed three rebel fighters, blinded several others and turned leaves on trees “totally dark”.⁸ He explained that the government air and ground units used a “toxic agent” that emitted a yellow and green vapour in battles at Bie in June, 1986, at Lucusse in July, 1986 and at Cuito Cuanavale in August, 1986.

New allegations of chemical weapons use by government forces in Angola were leveled in 1993. In January that year, the UNITA accused the MPLA of dropping chemical weapon bombs on the city of Ndalatando and also against civilians in the city of Huambo.⁹ However, the attention was diverted to the cases of so-called “steppage-gait” syndrome that were reported by UNITA forces between 1986 and 1990.¹⁰ Although no samples were collected from the area where the syndrome was reported, a number of

hypotheses, including chemical weapons use, were put forward to explain the symptoms of those affected. Later in the year 2000, the Angolan Army announced that it found chemical weapons in a UNITA arms cache in the central highlands.¹¹

Reasons for Angola not signing the CWC:

Given this background, notwithstanding the optimism expressed by the then Director General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Rogelio Pfirter, who stated at the 2007 Conference of the States Parties that Angola “fully supports” the CWC, Angola does not seem any closer to accession.¹² There are different reasons for Angola not signing the CWC, which can be illustrated as under.

1. Firstly, as pointed out by Rogelio Pfirter, Angola is constrained by logistical and resource crunch rather than political issues. This is despite the fact that Angola is one of the fastest growing economies of the world, with an annual average GDP growth rate of 11.1 percent between 2001 and 2010.¹³ The nearly three decades-long Angolan civil war had profoundly exhausted economic resources of Angola and as a result, Angola remained poor with a third of its population dependent on subsistence agriculture despite having extensive oil and gas resources, diamonds, hydroelectric potential, and rich agricultural land. Since 2002, only after the end of Civil War, the country began to build and improve infrastructure and also developed political and social institutions.
2. Secondly, Angola has no serious threat to its security since the end of civil war except for the issue of expulsions with the Democratic Republic of Congo. Following the end of Cold War, the external

relations of Angola have also been peaceful and cordial with its neighbours including South Africa, with which it had differences during civil war. This also meant end of ideological struggle between the capitalist and communist blocs and as a result, Angola’s approach to security changed in a substantial manner. The mutual defence pact with Namibia in 1999 further enhanced security, especially in its southern part. As a result, Angola feels less vulnerable and does not consider the need to adhere to the CWC to get security assurances from external powers.

3. Thirdly, Angola has a relatively small chemical industry spanning over six segments namely, base chemicals, agricultural chemicals, specialty chemicals, consumer chemicals, construction chemicals, and chemicals relating to oil and gas.¹⁴ These chemicals are mostly used in daily requirements and are not meant for weaponry development. At the same time, since the industry in Angola is not well developed, these chemicals are being imported mainly from the United States to meet local requirements. Thus, Angola feels that since there are no chemical weapons in Angola there is less urgency in signing the CWC that prohibits proliferation of chemical weapons.
4. Another issue that is preventing Angola from becoming a party to the Convention is the issue of transparency. It is to be mentioned here that of the 188 states party to the Convention, only seven countries have declared their chemical weapons stockpiles and the demilitarisation programme in these countries is in various stages of completion.¹⁵ Other countries, which possess clandestine chemical weapons, are yet to announce their demilitarisation efforts. Due to this legacy of secret

weapons programme, the demilitarisation of chemical weapons is taking more than the stipulated deadline. This is preventing Angola from trusting the universal elimination of chemical weapons as pronounced by the Convention.

5. In Addition, there is also apprehension in Angola about proliferation of chemical weapons and it has undertaken efforts to face any such emergency. For instance, the official Angolan news agency, *Angop*, reported in July 2010 that 30 officers from the Angolan armed forces attended a 15-day workshop at the command centre of the fourth infantry division in Kuito, central Bie province, aimed to educate officials on defence against chemical weapons, especially in the central military region.¹⁶ During the workshop, deputy Commander of the fourth division, Adelino da Conceicao Botelho de Carvalho, remarked that the seminar took place at a time when the armed forces, particularly the land forces, were making an effort to reform the system of defence against chemical weapons in the African country. He stressed that mass extermination defence is one of the most complex provisions in combat units aimed at preventing the troops from being infected with chemicals and reducing the threats of weapons of mass destruction to maintain the capacity of the military and to ensure the success of missions.

Why Angola should Sign the CWC:

- I. On the other hand, the need to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), except for the peaceful use of nuclear, biological and chemical materials, is an accepted norm amongst virtually all African States. As a

result, there is an almost unanimous rejection and an unequivocal ban of chemical weapons in Africa, which is testified by a near universal membership of 50 African states to the CWC out of a total of 54 states. Angola remains one of the few exceptions. However, it remains important to promote accession of the remaining states not yet party to the Convention and to achieve that the non-signatory countries should invariably be invited to participate in the Conference of the States Parties and also in regional and sub-regional meetings of the OPCW.

- II. Second, during the 16th Summit of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) in Tehran in August 2012, the member states issued a statement, calling for total eradication of chemical weapons throughout the world.¹⁷ The members also expressed concern over the fact that certain countries that possess chemical weapons have failed to comply with their obligations regarding the total destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles within the final extended deadline of April 29, 2012, and called upon them to fulfill their commitments. As a member of NAM, it is the responsibility of Angola to comply with the sentiment. For this, Angola needs to act immediately by signing the CWC.
- III. Third, the verification provisions of the CWC pertain not only to the military sector but also the civilian chemical industry through certain restrictions and obligations regarding the production, processing and consumption of chemicals that are considered relevant to the objectives of the Convention. It should be noted that CWC prohibits trade in certain chemicals with countries not party to the treaty and its provisions include promoting trade in chemicals and related equipment among State Parties. In case

of Angola, since its chemical industry is substantially depended on imports from external sources, accession to the treaty would expand avenues for cheaper imports from abroad.

- IV. Fourth, the Convention also contains provisions on assistance in case a State Party is attacked or threatened with attack by chemical weapons. Thus, accession to the convention protects Angola from future possible threats to its security.
- V. Fifthly, contrary to the apprehension of Angola, the threat of proliferation is much smaller in the case of chemical weapons when compared to nuclear or conventional weapons.¹⁸ This is because, many of the chemical weapons of today's arsenals are aging and dangerous to transport. Second, it would be cheaper in most cases for a country desiring chemical weapons to produce them domestically than to buy them in the illegal arms trade market. Third, the quantity of chemical weapons needed in order to pose a significant threat is large, and an illegal transfer of a significant quantity of chemical weapons would be difficult to hide. Finally, a country would not want to import chemical weapons unless it had sufficient chemical protection and training for its forces, a costly undertaking.
- VI. Lastly, Angola claims that it has no recorded history of possession and use of chemical weapons. However, it does not guarantee that the country cannot and would not make chemical weapons in future. This is primarily because any nation with a sizable chemical industry, particularly for making fertilizers and insecticides, can manufacture chemical agents. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that Angola adheres to the CWC to

prevent it from conducting clandestine chemical activities any time in future.

Conclusion

To conclude, despite 15 years of operation, some suspected chemical weapon possessor states remain outside the CWC regime. Immediate efforts should be made to bring these countries under the CWC umbrella, which will enhance trust and confidence in CWC for countries like Angola who would join thereafter. Until the whole world is open to inspections, one can never be certain that all chemical weapons have been fully destroyed and that no banned chemicals are being secretly produced or traded.

Under the OPCW's supervision, more than 43,000 metric tons (nearly 78 per cent) of the declared stockpiles of chemical weapons were successfully destroyed since the Convention's entry into force in April 1997. At the same time, estimates suggest that almost 30,000 metric tons of chemical agents still await destruction.¹⁹ Besides the destruction of remaining stockpiles, a key future focus should be on preventing the reemergence of such lethal weaponry. Meanwhile, terrorist organisations have reiterated their intention to obtain weapons of mass destruction, raising the stakes to secure and eliminate chemical weapons stockpiles as quickly as possible and strengthen the CWC nonproliferation and inspection regime.

Endnotes:

¹ The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction or the CWC aims to eliminate chemical weapon, a category of weapons of mass destruction. The Convention was adopted by the General Assembly on November 30, 1992 and entered into force on April 29, 1997, after its ratification by Hungary.

² "The UN Secretary-General's Message to Seventeenth Session of the Conference of States

- Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention”, *United Nations*, November 26, 2012, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/sgsm14673.doc.htm>, accessed December 12, 2012.
- ³ These chemical defoliants and herbicides were similar to the products employed by the US in Vietnam.
 - ⁴ “Chemical Warfare in Angola”, *Kora*, at <http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-117B-84-LSM%20pamphlet.pdf>, accessed December 3, 2012.
 - ⁵ Since 1961, the people of Angola, led by the MPLA, were engaged in armed resistance against their Portuguese oppression. “Genocide! In Angola”, *Kora*, at <http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-117B-84-LSM%20pamphlet.pdf>, accessed December 3, 2012.
 - ⁶ The Marxist-Leninist MPLA was supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, which sent nearly 30,000 troops into Angola in late-1975 while UNITA was backed by South Africa and the United States.
 - ⁷ De Wet Potgieter (2012), “Chemical warfare revisited”, *The New Age*, March 30, 2012, at http://www.thenewage.co.za/blogdetail.aspx?mid=186&blog_id=%202195, accessed November 29, 2012.
 - ⁸ Andrew Torchia (1986), “Chemical Weapons used in Angola, Rebels Claim”, *The Nashua Telegraph*, August 22, 1986, at <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=KFIQUvoPKFAC&dat=19860822&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>, accessed December 7, 2012.
 - ⁹ “Use of chemical weapons charged”, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report–Sub-Saharan Africa (FBIS-AFR), *FBIS-AFR-93-001*, January 4, 1993, p. 15, quoted in Thomas Stock and Anna De Geer, “Chemical Weapon Developments”, *SIPRI Year Book 1994*, p. 325 at http://archives.sipri.org/contents/expcon/cbwarfare/Publications/pdfs/cbw-yb1994_9.pdf, accessed December 3, 2012.
 - ¹⁰ The main symptom of the syndrome was partial paralysis of the lower limbs. Davey, B. J. (1993), “The “steppage-gait” patients in Angola: chemical warfare?”, *ASA Newsletter*, no. 36, June 10, 1993, p. 14; and “Chemical warfare in Angola?”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, vol. 5, no. 6, June 1993, pp. 280-83, quoted in Thomas Stock and Anna De Geer, “Chemical Weapon Developments”, *SIPRI Year Book 1994*, p. 326 at http://archives.sipri.org/contents/expcon/cbwarfare/Publications/pdfs/cbw-yb1994_9.pdf, accessed December 3, 2012.
 - ¹¹ “UN puts pressure on Angola rebels”, *BBC News*, January 9, 2000, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/595436.stm>, accessed December 7, 2012.
 - ¹² This is despite the fact that Angola is party to the 1925 Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare. Amelia Broodryk and Noël Stott (2011), “Enhancing the Role of the OPCW in Building Africa’s Capacity to Prevent the Misuse of Toxic Chemicals”, *Africa’s Policy Imperatives*, Issue 6, May 2011, Institute for Security Studies, at <http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/WMDPolicybriefIssue6.pdf>, accessed November 29, 2012.
 - ¹³ “Africa’s impressive growth”, *The Economist*, January 6, 2011, at http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/01/daily_chart, accessed December 11, 2012.
 - ¹⁴ Frost & Sullivan (2011), “Uncovering Growth Opportunities in Angolan Chemicals Market”, *Research and Markets*, April 2011, at http://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/1801987/uncovering_growth_opportunities_in_angolan.pdf, accessed December 19, 2012.
 - ¹⁵ These seven countries are Albania, India, Iraq, Libya, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.
 - ¹⁶ “Angolan army concludes seminar on chemical weapons”, *Global Times*, July 18, 2010, at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/world/africa/2010-07/552964.html>, accessed December 19, 2012.
 - ¹⁷ Noel Stott (2012), “Time for Angola to Ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention”, Institute For Security Studies, December 11, 2012, *Horn Portal*, at <http://horn.so/angola-time-for-angola-to-ratify-the-chemical-weapons-convention>, accessed December 17, 2012.
 - ¹⁸ “Chemical Weapons”, *Reaching Critical Will*, at <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/fact-sheets/critical-issues/4582-chemical-weapons>, accessed December 3, 2012.
 - ¹⁹ Paul F. Walker (2010), “Abolishing Chemical Weapons: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities”, *Arms Control Association*, November 2010, at <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/4513>, accessed November 29, 2012.