

Chemical Weapons are just as dangerous as ever!

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Summary

This piece is based on personal experiences of a volunteer of the TPM. This article focuses on the role of the Iranian victims of chemical weapons in promoting a culture of peace and raising awareness on the consequences of the use of chemical weapons.

Personal experience of volunteering for the Oral History Project at the Tehran Peace Museum*

For many people the fear of being exposed to chemical weapons (CW) or living as a chemical weapon victim (CWV) are just some words on paper or very far concepts. That is what I have heard from many visitors of the Tehran Peace Museum. But it is not the same for many people of my country, Iran. Once in a while, Iranians hear that another CWV has passed away after years of suffering from the long term consequences of CW. But it doesn't mean that Iranians know all the facts, too.

I didn't know many things myself when I visited the Tehran Peace Museum (TPM) for the first time in May 2012. I didn't know that for the first time after WWI, the CW were used in large amounts¹ during the Iran-Iraq war², that the nerve agents were used in the battlefield for the first time during this war by Iraqi forces or that the first gas attacks against civilians happened against the people of Sardasht in Iran.³ I learnt all these facts in the TPM, not by reading the panels, but by talking to the volunteers who have devoted their lives to raise awareness on the consequences of the CW; the volunteers who are also the victims of these hideous weapons.

These volunteers, these CWV, are the unique feature of the Tehran Peace Museum. Their role is essential and that is why the Oral History Project of survivors of the CW started the TPM in 2014. In their first hand reflections, these survivors share their experiences and lives after being exposed to the CW as well as their message of peace and friendship for people around the world and their wish for a world free of CW.

Here, I want to share with you one of the stories from a dear friend of mine, Jahanshah Sadeghi ⁴ who I met for the first time in our first interview session for the Oral History Project. All I knew before that was this: Jahanshah was a nurse at Soomar Field Hospital when the hospital was attacked with chemical weapons. And then I met him for the interview. He was coughing very badly while answering the questions, he had to use his artificial eye drops after about an hour and he was talking about the darkest memory of his life.

Jahanshah was a nurse in Field Hospital 528 near Soomar. He had chosen this job because he loved to help others. It was his way of making the world a better place. He was married for two years before the attack and he felt that his life was complete after his first child was born. Though being far from his family because of serving in a war zone was not easy.

In December 1986, while the Iranian forces were preparing for a big operation, the Soomar Field Hospital was equipped and medical experts prepared to treat the incoming wounded soldiers.

On December 31 1986, the Hospital was full of wounded soldiers and the medical staff were all very busy. Hearing the explosion from conventional bombs was not something strange that day. But it was about noon when the lives of everyone in the Soomar Field Hospital changed forever. Iraqi airplanes dropped eight bombs on the hospital - mustard gas bombs.

While interviewing him, I could see the pain and sadness in Jahanshah, even after all these years. He could remember the many corpses of his fellow colleagues or wounded soldiers he had seen that day. No one was ready for such an attack. After about an hour, the symptoms started to appear,

severe vomiting, loss of sight, cough and difficulty in breathing and blisters on the skin. The survivors were transferred to other cities and then their life as victims started.

Jahanshah was in a very critical condition, so he was sent to Germany where his skin and lungs were treated. But the damage to his body especially to his lungs could not be completely cured and he was told he had to live with only 30% of a normal lung capacity from now on. This is how he lived the rest of his life.

I have been friends with many chemical weapon victims since I started volunteering at the TPM. Each one is special. What made Jahanshah special was his kindness. He was unwell and in pain, but he could not stop caring about the others. He was always sharing the good things he had, a good feeling, a smile, even a candy!

It was 15th March 2015 and I was in the TPM when I heard the news that he has passed away. I remember it didn't seem real and I couldn't react to the news until later that night when I wrote about him in my diary and cried.

Now when I think about him, what I like to remember is not his injury, but is the fact that he did his best to end the use of the CW. He spoke out, to people in the TPM, to officials and delegates to his friends. He believed that we need to teach our young people to understand one another, to love and to forgive and not resort to violence. We need to show the youth the consequences of the use of WMD and to do our best to abolish all kinds of these weapons.

Since his death, whenever I get disappointed and I doubt if we can ever succeed in eliminating chemical and nuclear weapons, I think of his passion. YES, we can. We can do it if we just continue working together all

around the world and show that the use of WMD is not accepted in public opinion anymore and a world free of them is possible. We just need to work harder.

- * The Tehran Peace Museum (TPM) was established by an Iranian NGO, Society for Chemical Weapons Victims Support) in 2005. With its Educational and art programmes, it is as much an interactive peace centre as a museum. It coordinates peace education programme and hosts conferences on the culture of peace, reconciliation, international humanitarian law, disarmament, and peace advocacy.

TPM is mostly run by volunteer members. The volunteer guides of the museum are victims of chemical weapons who are actively engaged in its activities and are raising awareness about the consequences of the use of the WMD by sharing their own stories. They also work closely with the young volunteers in other activities of the museum.

TPM is a member of the International network of Museums for Peace and also acts as the Iranian office of the Mayors for Peace.

Endnotes:

- ¹ In UNMOVIC working document, published on 6 March 2003, Iraq declared that it has used 1800 tonnes of mustard gas, 140 tonnes of tabun and over 600 tonnes of sarin during the Iran-Iraq war.
- ² The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) was the longest conventional war of the 20th century. It ended in August 1988 after both parties accepted UN Security Council Resolution 598 and agreed on a ceasefire.
- ³ On June 28, 1987 the city of Sardasht in North West Iran was bombarded with chemical weapons by Iraqi jets. Thousands of civilians were exposed to mustard gas and more than 4000 residents were sent to other cities for

treatment. Many of them, are still suffering from the consequences.

- ⁴ The original stories are written by Mrs. Elizabeth Lewis after several interview sessions with survivors. What I share here is short version combined with my own notes, memories and reflections. To read the complete stories as well as other interviews please refer to the TPM's website.