

Threat of deadly brews

Reports from the United Nations, the International Red Cross, and European medical institutions treating Iranian casualties leave little doubt that Iraq has been using CB (chemical and biological) agents against Iran's troops.

Iranian forces attacking northeast of the port of Basra have been showered with HD mustard gas which causes burning of the skin and respiratory passages. European researchers are now investigating the possibility that biological agents have also been mixed into the mustard gas, producing an extremely lethal combination.

Initial studies have turned up evidence of mycotoxins, also known as "yellow rain," in the bodies of wounded Iranians. This new family of toxic agents was first used by Vietnamese forces against the hill tribes of Laos; more recently, Soviet forces in Afghanistan have been reported to be using "yellow rain" against Muslim guerrillas.

But mycotoxins may not be the only toxic agent in use. Other toxins, such as botulism, staphylococcus and saxitoxin, all of which attack the central nervous system, might also have been employed by Iraq.

According to the UN, the nerve gas GA (tabun) and the blood agent AC (hydrogen cyanide) have also been used against the Iranians by Iraq. Both of these agents were invented by the artful Germans who seem to have fathered almost every new weapon. Tabun causes central nervous system collapse while hydrogen cyanide attacks the blood, causing convulsions and death.

The intriguing question is, where did Iraq obtain these weapons? Iran has charged that Britain supplied Iraq with three chemical-warfare plants; England denies this assertion, claiming the plants were for the manufacture of insecticides. Many CB specialists believe that plants producing insecticide can be used (without too much difficulty) to produce many toxic agents.

But there is another intriguing possibility. No Western power produces hydrogen cyanide or mycotoxins. France might manufacture tabun, though this cannot be confirmed since it wraps its CB program in tight secrecy. Some British reports suggest that Iraq obtained hydrogen cyanide and mycotoxins from either East Germany, Russia, or both. France, Iraq's principal arms supplier, may have secretly delivered tabun or it might have come from old Warsaw Pact stocks, having been replaced by the more deadly nerve agents, soman and VX.

Even though CB agents are banned by a number of international conventions, their use, particularly in the Third World, is clearly on the increase — a sort of poor man's nuclear weapon. This trend was begun by Egypt in 1965 during the civil war in Yemen where mustard gas was employed against mountain tribesmen. The U.S. made extensive use of the irritating agents CN and CS during the Vietnam war: These super-potent tear gasses often proved lethal in tunnels or confined spaces.

Now, the use of CB agents by Russia, Vietnam and Iraq is causing considerable worry to military planners who fear that a literal Pandora's Box has been opened. With the exception of the Soviet

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armed forces, almost all nations lack effective protection against biological and toxic agents — particularly when they are mixed together. This growing alarm is today most acute in Israel.

The security given to Israel by its apparently invincible armed forces and possession of 30 atomic weapons is now being shaken by the Iran-Iraq war. Israel's airbases are the vital keystone of its conventional military power. Thanks to the enclosure of aircraft in underground or reinforced shelters, excellent runway damage repair facilities and strong anti-aircraft defences, its bases were thought virtually invulnerable.

But after the use of toxic agents by Iraq, Israel must now face the threat of a surprise attack on its airbases by means of bombs or medium-range missiles carrying chemical and biological warheads. NATO studies have shown that if such an attack were launched during the summer, the effectiveness of ground crews would decline by 80% within 24 hours. Pilots and mechanics, forced to wear heavy, impermeable protective gear, would quickly succumb to heat stroke and disorientation.

Airbases, and other military installations in Israel, could barely cope with attacks using blistering agents and nerve gas. When toxins are added to this deadly brew, no one can estimate the full extent of casualties or deterioration of performance. What appears certain is that if Israel were caught unaware by such a surprise attack, it would be in grave peril and likely to respond with tactical nuclear strikes against its foes.

If Iraq can acquire and use CB agents, so can Syria, Egypt and Libya — if they do not already have this capacity. As long ago as 1966 reports of a purported Egyptian CB strike capability were being heard. The rest of the Third World cannot help but be attracted to this new, inexpensive and effective means of warfare.

The measure of gravity with which the U.S. views this growing threat can be seen in its strong denunciations of Iraq for using CB agents. Determined to halt Iranian revolutionary expansion, the U.S. has been quietly backing Iraq; now, the U.S. has chosen to imperil these improving relations in order to emphasize that CB weapons must not be used.

Unless a worldwide outcry halts the use of CB weapons in the Gulf war, it is more than likely that secret laboratories in many nations — Iran, India, Pakistan, Syria, Libya, South Africa and China to name but a few — will begin mixing deadly chemical brews that could prove, in the end, even more threatening than nuclear weapons.

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