

CBW

CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WARFARE

London Conference on CBW

edited by
STEVEN ROSE



GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD
London · Toronto · Wellington · Sydney

8. The Yemen

M. Meselson

The History

Since 1963 there have been sporadic reports of the use of poison gas in the Yemeni civil war. It has been alleged that the gas was being used by the Egyptians on behalf of their allies, the Yemeni Republicans. The charges have come from the Yemeni Royalists, their supporters the Saudi Arabians, from various journalists, and, most authoritatively, from the International Red Cross.

So far as the outside world is concerned suggestions of the use of gas in the Yemen began on July 8th, 1963, with an article in the London *Daily Telegraph* by Richard Beeston stating that there had been a gas attack on the village of Al Kanma. Following this story, U Thant initiated an inquiry "to determine whether poison gas has been used in the fighting in the Yemen." A United Nations observation team in the Yemen produced a preliminary report stating they had no evidence that gas had been used but that inquiries were continuing. No definite conclusion was ever announced by the U.N.

I find no further reference in the press to the use of gas in the Yemen until November, 1966, when Wilfred Thesiger, a British archeologist and explorer who had spent some time with the Royalists, stated that he had come into a village shortly after a gas attack. Thesiger reported seeing twenty victims of what he termed "blinding gas" and said that he treated a boy suffering from "blister gas" that might have been a form of mustard.

The first alleged use of nerve gas took place on January 5th, 1967, on the village of Kitaf, the military headquarters of the Yemeni Royalists. This would be the first use in any war of nerve gas, a class of compounds far more deadly than any other known war gases. Judith Listowel, writing in the *Statist*, reports an interview with the survivors and states that 155 persons were killed and 200 more severely poisoned. There happened to be a Red Cross team in the vicinity of Kitaf at the time, and they are alleged to have

sent a cable to their superiors reporting the gas attack and requesting gas-masks. The Red Cross did not officially acknowledge the telegram, but the Red Cross Director in Geneva stated that all parties had been appealed to not to use illegal weapons. On January 24th, Jordan threatened to withdraw recognition of the Yemeni Republican government unless the use of gas was stopped.

On January 31st, the United Arab Republic Minister of National Guidance, Mohammed Fayek, denied that the U.A.R. had ever used gas and furthermore said that Egypt would welcome a United Nations fact-finding commission to investigate the charges.

Over the next three months, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the U.N. urged U Thant to speak out against the use of gas in the Yemen apparently not wishing to place the matter before the U.N. himself. The Saudi Arabians did however produce several pages of medical and chemical evidence purporting to show that nerve gas had been used at Kitaf. The evidence includes measurements of the phosphate content of the blood of human and animal casualties, supposedly an indication of the use of nerve gas. However, some of the figures seemed far too high to be reasonable.

On May 10th, 1967, according to a report published in the *New York Times* and attributed to the International Red Cross, there was an attack using gas on two Yemeni villages, Gadafa and Gahar. On the following day the International Red Cross team in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, received an urgent request for help. They arrived in Gahar on May 15th after being attacked on the road by military aircraft. The team conducted an autopsy and examined several survivors. Their report claims that 75 people were killed by the attack and 273 more by attacks on other villages later in May. The autopsy results were sent to the Faculty of Forensic Medicine at the University of Berne for evaluation, where it was concluded that the victims described had indeed been killed by poison gas, the most likely agent being mustard. Although these details have never been officially acknowledged by the Red Cross, on June 2nd, 1967, it issued a statement saying:

The International Committee of the Red Cross has again received, from delegates in the Yemen, reports of bombing by toxic gas. A medical team led by the head of the R.C. Mission in the Yemen went on May 15 and 16 to a village in the northern part of the country to attempt to give aid to the victims of bombing which had taken place some days previously and as a result of which, according to the survivors, many inhabitants had died of asphyxiation. Delayed by air raids to which the convoy was victim, I.C.R.C. doctors on arrival at the site immediately

gave treatment to some of the wounded and collected various indications pointing to the use of poison gas. Extremely disturbed and concerned by these methods of warfare, which are absolutely forbidden by codified international and customary law, the International Committee of the Red Cross at once communicated its delegates' reports to all authorities concerned in the Yemen conflict requesting them to undertake a solemn engagement not to resort in any circumstances whatever to the use of asphyxiating gases or any other similar toxic substances.

The salient points in this record are that poison gas has been used in violation of the Geneva Protocol, that it has been used against civilians, and that nerve gas may have been employed in some of the attacks. The evidence indicates that Egypt is responsible, but Egyptian officials have denied the charge and have asked for an international investigation.

There have been no reports of gas warfare in the Yemen since the Arab-Israeli war of last year. However, it was not until about that time, with the first official Red Cross confirmation that gas had been used, that world reaction began to assume serious proportions. This, together with a variety of political reasons, may explain the failure of the world community to take more decisive steps to enforce the 1925 Geneva prohibition against gas warfare.

The Yemeni events and the United Kingdom

D. E. Viney

The first official British comment on the accumulating evidence of the use of toxic gas in the Yemen came on January 31st, 1967, when the Prime Minister agreed in the House that "such evidence as I have suggests pretty strongly that poison gas may have been used". It was immediately after this that Egyptian papers invited the U.N. to investigate, and the U.A.R. National Assembly was told by its Arab Affairs Committee (February 6th) that the allegations were a defamatory invention put out by Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

After unauthorized versions of the International Red Cross team's report had reached the press, and interest in the subject had been enhanced by Israeli apprehensions during the Middle East conflict in June, the Government was again pressed for comment. Minister of State, George Thompson, stated on July 3rd: "We have received well substantiated reports that gas was used several times. Both a mustard type and a choking type have been used on different occasions."

When the possibility of a British initiative was raised Foreign Secretary, George Brown, reiterated that "we condemn the use of gas in the Yemen," but argued that it would be most appropriate

for some Arab country, such as Saudi Arabia, to take action in the first place. That was on July 6th. Later in the month over two hundred Members of Parliament nevertheless signed a letter requesting that the Government should do something, and Mr Brown told an all-party delegation of three that the United Kingdom would consult with other powers as to "the best means of putting a stop to this clear breach of generally accepted rules of conduct".

Immediately after this Parliament went into recess. When it met again the Egyptians were pulling out of the Yemen; the British Government made it clear that none of the other powers consulted was interested in initiating further action and that it considered in any case that such an initiative might now exacerbate the situation in the Yemen rather than assist a settlement. It was of course widely assumed that a desire to avoid further unpopularity with the Arab world in the wake of the Middle East war played a major role in setting this attitude, and the West would no doubt have found itself isolated if it had impugned Egypt. The Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and other countries who had taken up a strongly pro-Arab line could not have been expected to lend any diplomatic aid for such a purpose, even though they were better placed to exert persuasion on Arab countries than the British were. If they made private representations in Cairo on the undesirability of flouting the Geneva Protocol—and it cannot be excluded that they did so—they evidently had little success.

Since the expert evidence of the use of lethal gases in the Yemen was not made public, no-one without special access to the facts can point the finger dogmatically at Egypt. However, the evidence was apparently found persuasive by British Ministers who had every political reason not to inflate the issue. The reasons why no international action was in the end taken are understandable enough. But the net result is that the Geneva Protocol, that lone achievement in the history of attempts to proscribe particular classes of weapons, is seen to have been flouted with impunity in the very kind of military confrontation where, because of the extreme inequality of strength and the impossibility of deterrence or reprisal in kind, respect for law is almost the only motive for restraint; and indeed to have been flouted (it seems) by a state which signed the original Protocol in 1925, reaffirmed its adhesion on becoming a Republic in 1953, and joined in the general acclamation of the ban on lethal chemical weapons during the United Nations debate in 1966.