

The Pentagon gassed American soldiers and civilians in 1960s tests

Patrick Martin
18 October 2002

A centerpiece of the Bush administration's propaganda to justify a US invasion of Iraq is the charge that Saddam Hussein "used gas against his own people." This is a reference to the Iraqi military's gassing of Kurdish villages in the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, a crime that was carried out with the tacit support of the Reagan administration and Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East, the current secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld.

Washington's professed horror over the use of poison gas is doubly hypocritical, now that it has been revealed that the Pentagon itself used chemical and biological weapons against American soldiers, sailors and civilians, as part of military weapons testing in the 1960s and 1970s.

A Pentagon spokesman confirmed last week that these tests took place during a 12-year period, from 1962 through 1973, exposing more than 5,000 soldiers and sailors and an unknown, but large, number of civilians—possibly "into the thousands," the official said.

The Department of Defense revealed five months ago that Navy ships had been sprayed with chemical and biological toxins on ten separate occasions during the 1960s. All of the tests were conducted in the Pacific Ocean, far from land, and all involved, according to the military, the use of simulants—diluted or supposedly harmless versions of nerve gas that would disperse like the real chemical poisons, but cause no ill effects. The purpose was to test whether Navy personnel could operate ships efficiently while wearing protective gear, the Pentagon said.

It now appears that this revelation was only the tip of the iceberg. Newly released records confirm that at least 28 additional tests were conducted on Americans, using both chemical and biological toxins, seven at sea

and 21 on land. The tests were carried out in six states—Maryland, Florida, Utah, California, Hawaii and Alaska—and in Canada and Great Britain. Among the substances sprayed on unwitting subjects were e-coli bacteria and nerve gases such as sarin (used in the Tokyo subway terrorist attack), tabun and VX.

In all cases, Pentagon officials now claim, the poisons were distributed in less than lethal doses. The purpose of the tests was to study the dispersal patterns—how wind currents, temperature and terrain affected the movement of spores or molecules—not to study the effects of the toxins themselves on human subjects. But many of the poisons used can cause significant damage even in small doses, and some of the biological agents used are more dangerous than they were believed to be at the time.

For instance, a bacterium known as *Bacillus globigii*, related to anthrax but believed at the time to be harmless, was sprayed over the most populous Hawaiian island, Oahu, in a 1965 test code-named "Big Tom." Later research found that the bacterium can cause infections in people with weakened immune systems.

Fifty-three veterans who were exposed to chemical or biological poisons in the course of these tests have filed health claims in the last decade, reporting muscular, skeletal, digestive, hearing, skin and cardiovascular disorders. Only 1,400 of the soldiers and sailors involved in the tests, about one third of the total, have been notified that they may have been exposed to poisons. There has been no effort to notify civilians who may have been exposed.

Some of the tests detailed in the Pentagon records include:

* Elk Hunt II, at the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland, with VX nerve gas released on 11 separate occasions

from October 27 to December 17, 1965.

* DTC Test 69-12, also at Edgewood, in the spring of 1969, with the release of four different nerve agents, including sarin, tabun, soman and VX.

* Devil Hole I, at the Gerstle River test site near Fort Greeley, Alaska in the summer of 1965. Sarin gas was fired in artillery shells and rockets into heavily forested terrain.

* Devil Hole II, also at Fort Greeley, using VX nerve gas in artillery shells.

* Rapid Tan I, II, and III, a series of tests in 1967 and 1968 in England and Canada, using sarin, VX, tabun and soman. The British test location was the chemical weapons facility at Porton Down. The Canadian test was at Suffield Defence Research Establishment in Ralson.

The United States developed huge stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons during the Cold War for use against the Soviet Union and China in the event of a third world war. The testing program followed a review of US military preparedness in 1961 by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. He initiated a program of developing chemical and biological weapons as an offensive weapon against the USSR, code-named “Project 112.”

The program was officially scrapped when the United States signed a 1973 treaty banning biological warfare testing, although germ warfare research has continued illegally at US facilities such as the Dugway Proving Grounds in Utah and Ft. Detrick, Maryland—the sources of the anthrax used in last year’s attack on Congress.

Dozens of military officers were aware of the real nature of the tests, but most lower-level soldiers were not. They were told the chemical substances were harmless, and in some cases were not even equipped with protective gear and masks. Veterans advocate Kirt Love, replying to the Pentagon revelation, said, “Most of these people didn’t have a clue what they were part of.”

The Pentagon records say that local government authorities in Hawaii and other areas were informed of the testing ahead of time, but these agencies did not inform the population at large.

Congressman Mike Thompson, a California Democrat who raised the issue of chemical and biological testing on human subjects several years ago, said that Pentagon officials told him at the time that the

testing “never happened.” Then they changed their story to admit the tests, but “not to worry, they only used simulants.” Now the military has admitted that real poisons were used, and even that admission in all probability represents less than the whole truth. “It’s taken a long time to get this far, and quite honestly, I don’t think we’re there yet,” he said.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact