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CHEMICAL WEAPONS USE IN KURDISTAN: IRAQ'S FINAL OFFENSIVE

A STAFF REPORT

TO THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE

OCTOBER 1988

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Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
89-722 == WASHINGTON : 1988

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● The refugees appear to be protected and reasonably well taken care of in Turkey. However, the influx of 65,000 refugees has imposed a substantial financial burden on the Turkish Government and the country is seeking international assistance. While Turkey risked Iraqi wrath by accepting the Kurdish refugees, it is seeking to maintain cordial relations with its neighbor. Consequently, the Turkish Government is downplaying the poison gas stories—while carefully not denying their accuracy—and local authorities in the border region are following Ankara's lead.

● Since 1984 Iraq has used chemical weapons on a large scale without paying any price in political or economic relations with other countries. Global acquiescence in previous Iraqi use of chemical weapons has undoubtedly been a factor in Iraq's belief it could use gas on the Kurds with no international consequences. The Reagan administration has been denouncing Iraqi use of chemical weapons since 1984. It has not followed up with action to deter such use.

Woman with her possessions at Cigli refugee gathering point near Iraq border.

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Area of chemical weapons attacks

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The eyewitness accounts also occur within the context of a brutal central government policy to suppress the Iraqi Kurds. The key feature of this policy is the depopulation of rural Kurdistan and the relocation of the people to guarded villages that have many aspects of a concentration camp. The depopulation has been accompanied by a considerable loss of life.

Finally, doubters of the poison gas attacks would have to provide an alternative explanation for the very sudden exodus of the Pesh Merga from Iraq. The Pesh Merga are seasoned guerrilla fighters who have held out against various Iraqi regimes for 30 years. Suddenly, between August 25 and September 5, 1988, the resistance totally collapsed and the insurgents fled. Something catastrophic happened and every piece of evidence points to the use of poison gas.

In sum, the eyewitness accounts occur in the context of prior Iraqi use of chemical weapons, of a brutal Kurdish policy, and of a sudden, otherwise incomprehensible collapse of the Kurdish resistance. It is in this context that we sought to evaluate the eyewitness accounts of Iraqi chemical use on Kurdish civilians, and it is this context that we found the accounts compelling and conclusive.

Diyarbakir refugee camp.

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Locating Kurdish villages subject to chemical weapons attack on the topographical map.

As described by the villagers, the bombs that fell on the morning of August 25 did not produce a large explosion. Only a weak sound could be heard and then a yellowish cloud spread out from the center of the explosion and became a thin mist. The air became filled with a mixture of smells—"bad garlic," "rotten onions," and "bad apples."

Those who were very close to the bombs died almost instantly. Those who did not die instantly found it difficult to breathe and began to vomit. The gas stung the eyes, skin, and lungs of the villagers exposed to it. Many suffered temporary blindness.

After the bombs exploded, many villagers ran and submerged themselves in nearby streams to escape the spreading gas. They placed wet cloth over their noses, eyes, and mouths to block the gas. Many of those who made it to the streams survived. Those who could not run from the growing smell, mostly the very old and the very young, died.

The survivors who saw the dead reported that blood could be seen trickling out of the mouths of some of the bodies. A yellowish fluid could also be seen oozing out the the noses and mouths of some of the dead. Some said the bodies appeared frozen. Many of the dead bodies turned blackish blue. Most of the villagers quickly abandoned the contaminated areas, leaving the bodies unburied in the sun. In some cases, they later returned to the poisoned villages to bury the bodies. The few who ventured to look at the shattered pieces of the bomb casings said they were colored green.

In every village where chemical bombs were dropped the livestock—mostly donkeys and goats—died. Birds are also reported to have "fallen out of the sky." Bees in the area are also said to have been killed by the gas.

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Children at Cigli refugee gathering point.

B. EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

1. Accounts from Kurdish Refugees

The Iraqi chemical attacks on Kurdish villages from August 25 through August 27 were witnessed by thousands of Kurds. Their descriptions of these attacks provide the best evidence that the attacks took place. The following are representative excerpts from interviews with eyewitnesses to the attacks. They include Pesh Merga leaders, Pesh Merga fighters, villagers, a few professionals, women, and several children.

1. Ekrem Mai of Dihok city: "I am a Pesh Merga and have spent 27 years fighting. Many have been martyred and killed. Since the Iran-Iraq war, fighting with Iraq has continued. After the Iran-Iraq ceasefire, all the chemical weapons that Iraq had were turned against the Kurdish people.

"On the 25th of August, at 6 a.m., Iraqi warplanes came to Amadiyah valley in the region of Zakho and dropped chemical weapons on four of our villages. They killed everything: ani-

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7. Minase from Bergini village, holding her child Hejar: "All the animals died. There were four bombs from each plane. Anyone who could not make it to the river died because of the smell. After the use of weapons, we lost our vision. We are still vomiting. He wanted to kill all of us—babies, old people, children."

Minase (on left) from Bergini village holding her child, Hejar.

8. Omer Dibaba from Bergini village: "Eight planes attacked on the 25th. Fifteen people from my family died. We left their bodies in the sun."

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9. Bashir Shemseddin and his father from Vermil village: "Four planes came over on August 25 and dropped bombs. We did not know what happened. We ran outside. We got dizzy and could not see. We fell down and threw up. In our village, 200 to 300 people died. All the animals and birds died. All the trees dried up. It smelled like something burned. The whole world turned to yellow."

Bashir Shemseddin from Vermil village, showing burns from chemical weapons.

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10. Mohammed Ahmad for Guldiye village: "I am 20 years old. I am from Guldiye village near the Kabur river in Zakho. We were attacked on August 25 at 6 a.m. There were 45 people in my village. I am the only survivor."

11. Farouk Abdullah from Ekmala village: "I cannot see if there is bright sunlight. At 6:26 a.m. on August 25, five planes attacked. My friends died in the village. I saw three people die—my friends Sari Abdullah, Ekrem Sari his son, and Amina Mustafa his wife. Many people fell down, but I could not see clearly. They attacked by chemical bombs. I tried to run away from the smoke, and the wind was against me but then the wind changed. I tried to run back, but I fell and began to vomit. It is hard to breathe. My friends came and tried to take me to a safer place. There are no more animals. The leaves fell off the trees. The fish in the brook died. Anyone who touched the clothes of the dead people became blind."

Farouk Abdullah from Ekmala village.

12. Osman Khalid from Tika (Duka) village: "I left the village and 5 minutes later 14 people died—Mehdi from Kurki, Ismail Tabir, Osman Ibrahim, Ahmad Mela, Murat Ahmad, Samih Ahmad, Suleiman Hadji Haydar, Muhammad Tatar, Shahid Sadik, Suleiman Shemsettin, Azad Murad, Fatma Ali."

13. Mohammad Tahir from Berizon valley: "On August 28, my wife Asma Tahir and my brother-in-law Mohammad Mahmood were killed while trying to escape to Turkey."

14. Selam Ahmadi from Amadiyah: "I saw planes bombing the villages of Vermil, Banka, Ekmala, Bilijane, and Tika (Duka). In the morning and at 3 p.m., six planes came to these villages and destroyed them with bombs. I was in Kanebalaw in the mountains near these villages. In Tika (Duka), 50 people

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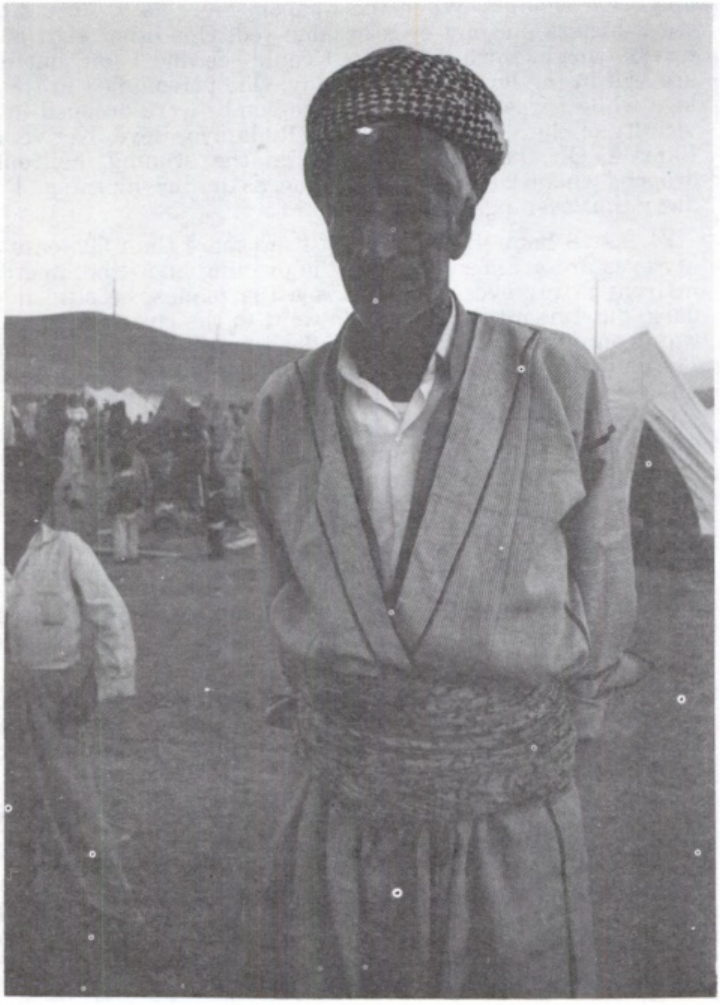

Musimi Kitani, cousin of the Iraq Ambassador to the United Nations.

22. Dr. Said Ahmad Shakir from Bawerke near Sersen: "My daughter, Jivan Said Ahmad, 10 years old, was killed by artillery fire on the road to Turkey. In my village, 114 people have been wounded by chemical weapons. Their symptoms were redness of eyes, trouble breathing, and they turned yellow. They got dizzy and could not talk. None of those treated came to Turkey. They could not make their way."

23. Ahmed Ali from Rashowa village: "I was in Sirana village on the morning of August 25 when nine jets bombed around the village from 9 to 10 and then from 12 to 1 bombed the lower parts of the village. We put the families in rivers

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other side are 10 to 20 kilometers away, just on the other side of the mountain. All the bees in Cigli village have died."

Children at Yusekova refugee camp.

C. THE PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The compelling testimonial evidence of the refugees is supported by (1) the symptoms exhibited by those who claim to have been exposed to chemical attack, and (2) large-scale deaths of bees on the Turkish side of the Iraq border and of animals brought by the refugees.

1. The Classic Symptoms

At least fifteen of the refugees we interviewed exhibited symptoms that are characteristic of poisoning from various types of chemical weapons. Many said they had suffered temporary blindness when the bombs exploded. These refugees still had watery eyes and complained of blurry vision. They also asserted that the gas had stung their lungs and complained of difficulty in breathing. Two of the women said they threw up after being exposed to the gas and that the vomiting spasms continued. Several refugees displayed skin discolorations which they linked to gas attacks. Some complained of severe itching. One 13-year-old boy, Bashir Semsettin, had been seriously burned on his chest and back. The skin on his chest and back had turned a bright pink, punctuated by streaks of black.

These symptoms—blurry vision, difficulty breathing, vomiting, and burned and itchy skin—are associated with various chemical agents, including mustard gas, concentrated tear gas, and vomiting agents. While none of these individual cases alone is conclusive,

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they form a common pattern that lends strong support to the eyewitness accounts.

KURDISH REFUGEES.—The men on the left and right report trouble with their vision in bright sunlight as a result of exposure to chemical weapons.

2. Dead Bees

Turkish beekeepers living close to the Iraqi border have reported the widespread death of their honeybees. According to Mr. Bezergan, the District Administrator for Semdinli, honey production has fallen from 250 tons last year to an estimated 5 to 10 tons this year. Semdinli is a Turkish town located near the intersection of the Turkish-Iraqi-Iranian borders. The villagers we talked to unanimously attributed the bee deaths to the Iraqi use of chemical weapons. Mr. Bezergan said a sample of the dead bees had been sent to Ankara for analysis at the beginning of August, but that no reply had been received to date.

According to the Turkish villagers, bees fly about 4 to 5 kilometers. The villages that have experienced large bees losses fall within 4 to 5 kilometers "as the bee flies" of the Iraqi border. In addition, villagers from Ortakoy, a village far from the Iranian border but less than a kilometer from the Iraqi border, reported that their bees began to die after the chemical attacks in late August. In both cases, Turkish villagers said the bees died in sudden waves, rather than over a long period of time. (This would appear to rule out the possibility of death through such natural causes as bee mites, which—according to American scientific experts—would not produce sudden, large-scale deaths of adult bees.)

We have collected dead bee samples from three villages near the Iraqi-Turkish border—Altinsu, Incesu (both villages near the town of Semdinli), and Ortakoy. These samples have been sent to U.S. Government laboratories for analysis.

3. Dead Animals

When the Kurdish refugees fled to Turkey, they brought as much of their livestock as possible. Some of this livestock was said

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Kurdish refugees at Cigli refugee gathering point.

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Yusekova refugee camp.

B. A BALANCING ACT FOR TURKEY

The refugees decision to remain in Turkey for the time being has not only placed a burden on Turkey's treasury; it has also forced the Turks to master a difficult diplomatic balancing act. Turkey has been severely criticized in the West for its refusal to allow its own Kurdish population a greater degree of cultural freedom. By accepting the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey hopes to dismiss such Western criticism and promote its ambition to enter the European Community. For this reason, Prime Minister Ozal recently said, "Turkey is a democratic country, respectful of human rights * * * Turkey's behavior in this affair is the best possible answer to accusations directed against us on this subject."

At the same time Turkey is reaching out to the West, it also hopes to maintain cordial relations with Bagdhad. Turkish businesses, particularly the excess capacity construction industry, see great profits in helping to rebuild a war-torn Iraq. Therefore, Turkey has been careful not to take any steps that could rupture its relations with Iraq. As a result, the Turkish Government is downplaying the poison gas stories—while carefully not denying their accuracy—and local authorities in the border region are now following Anakara's lead. At the time of the initial refugee influx, however, local Turkish officials reportedly told visitors they were convinced that chemical weapons had been used.

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Pro-American demonstration at Silopi refugee camp (in response to U.S. Senate passage of the Iraq sanctions bill).

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Iraq's latest use of chemical attacks proves its disdain for the handwringing of the international community, the administration has called the Senate bill "premature." It opposes efforts to impose immediate sanctions against Iraq until Iraq foreswears the use of chemical weapons.

Indeed, rather than seriously pressuring Iraq to cease its unacceptable use of chemical weapons, United States relations with Iraq have warmed considerably since the first United States protests. In November 1984, the United States and Iraq reestablished diplomatic relations after a 17-year hiatus. Eager to strengthen economic ties with a country that holds the non-Communist world's second largest proven oil reserves, the administration generously provided Iraq with credit guarantees worth $600 million to purchase United States agricultural exports.

Finally, and most importantly, the Reagan administration assisted Iraq's military and diplomatic efforts to stave off defeat by Iran. Such assistance included: (1) leadership of an effort to embargo arms sales to Iran (Operation Staunch); (2) the sharing of intelligence, at least according to Iraqi Government statements; (3) the escorting of the oil tankers of Iraq's ally Kuwait, which in turn led to a United States-Iran naval confrontation; and (4) leadership in the effort to secure a mandatory U.N. resolution to end the Iran-Iraq war.

This pro-Iraq tilt was not, of course, a fully consistent policy. In 1985 and 1986, the United States was secretly assisting Iran, providing United States arms to the Iranian military. Ultimately, however, embarrassment following the exposure of the administration's arms-for-hostages policy resulted in an even stronger pro-Iraq tilt.

Under these circumstances, the Iraqi regime looked to United States actions in the wake of the chemical weapons use and not to the words.

While tough U.S. talk substituted for concrete action, the United States was nonetheless unique in at least speaking out. The rest of

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SEC. 7. UNITED NATIONS.—The Secretary of State is requested to immediately bring before the Security Council of the United Nations the matter of Iraq's use of poison gas against its own nationals, most of whom are defenseless civilians, and demand that, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 620, appropriate and effective measures be taken against Iraq for its repeated use of chemical weapons.

SEC. 8. EFFECTIVE DATE.—This Act shall take effect on enactment.

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