

How we can save Syria's chlorine victims

Governments cannot stop the horror – so the rest of us must come to the aid of the innocent



We need to fund and supply equipment that could provide extensive help and reassurance to the areas where chemical attacks have been taking place Photo: Reuters

By David Owen

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It was the use of chemical weapons in Syria – in the shape of a horrendous attack in the suburbs of Damascus in the summer of 2013 – that first stirred the world to action. Under a Russian/American deal, reached with United Nations support, the bulk of President Bashar al-Assad's stockpile of sarin and other chemical warfare components has been satisfactorily dealt with under international supervision.

But now another horror has emerged – the use of chlorine. Tests conducted for this newspaper last month by a retired British army colonel, Hamish de Bretton Gordon, who now runs a chemical weapons consultancy, showed the presence of chlorine and ammonia in samples taken from the scene of eight recent attacks in the north-west of Syria. Witnesses reported that the bombs were dropped by helicopters: if that is true, it would suggest they were deployed by the Assad regime.

Chlorine is not sarin: it is not as lethal, and indeed the rapidity with which it dissipates means it had previously been seen as almost redundant in warfare. However, it can kill – as it has done in Syria – and it can cause crippling injury, turning to hydrochloric acid in the lungs and throat. It also has the capacity to instil panic, which is perhaps its true purpose at this stage in the long civil war.

It cannot be said strongly enough that any use of chemical weapons is a crime. This form of warfare is clearly outlawed by the Chemical Weapons Convention, to which Syria is now a signatory. Yet efforts to punish those dropping these bombs – or even to deter them – have been stymied, not least by those who maintain there is not enough indisputable evidence to assign responsibility to one side.

The international community has also been forced to stand by, with the West divided internally over the advisability of intervention and Russia and China using the precedent of Libya – where they believe humanitarian intervention was used by Nato as a cover for regime change – to block any action over Syria. The Ukraine crisis is also making it harder for the common action over sarin to be built on when it comes to the use of chlorine.

But even if we cannot stop chlorine being used, we can at the very least mitigate its effects on the civilian population. Indeed, the fact that it is not difficult to protect oneself against such attacks provides an opening to those of us who are tormented by the conflict – and by the apparent impossibility of a solution.

How can we do this? By refusing to wait for government action, or even the UN. Instead, we need – as individual citizens – to support the charitable agencies who are already working with doctors and nurses in those areas most hard-hit by chlorine use.

In saying this, I do not mean to denigrate the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which has said it will investigate the recent attacks, and has sought access via the government in Damascus – as it must, as a UN-sponsored agency. The OPCW is an excellent body, and clearly has a role to play. Yet for now, it is unable to reach the key sites, which are behind rebel lines. France and the United States are also conducting their own tests on samples believed to be from the same sites as The Telegraph's. John Kerry, the US secretary of state, and Laurent Fabius, the French foreign minister, have both indicated that they expect the findings to show further use of chemicals as weapons by the regime. But as in the past, this is unlikely to lead to outside military intervention.

In that context, there is a need for a more flexible and pragmatic approach – one that depends not on

governments, but on news organisations; on independent experts, such as Col de Bretton Gordon; on the extraordinarily brave network of doctors and other volunteers working inside Syria; and on the compassion of the citizens of Britain and other nations.

This newspaper has provided compelling evidence as to the scale of the problem. But what is now needed is practical help – and speed is of the essence. We need to mount an intensive effort to inform field workers in Syria, whether professional or voluntary, of the exact steps – some very simple – that can be taken to protect civilians from chlorine, and by doing so to deter and reduce its further use. We need to fund and supply the protective, monitoring and decontamination equipment that could provide extensive help and reassurance to the areas where these attacks have been taking place.

To reduce the effects of the chlorine bombs to the point where they will be virtually useless, it has been estimated that you would need just 5,000 chemical hoods, 50 air monitoring units (to place in hospitals and clinics to alert staff of chemical use nearby), a supply of decontamination kits, and the training for staff to use these properly and promptly. The total cost might be £1 million – but that is a small price to pay for such an achievable and desirable outcome.

The use of chemicals is one more horrifying episode in the long-running human, political and religious catastrophe that is the Syrian civil war. Few similar tragedies have evoked such a sense of hopelessness in the deadlocked international community. But this programme of activity – which is getting under way as I write – is one significant way in which we can save, and improve, the lives of the ordinary people who are the victims of this atrocious form of warfare.

Lord Owen was foreign secretary from 1977-79, and EU envoy to the former Yugoslavia from 1992-5

How we moderate

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