

Canada's Use of Chemical Weapons

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Global Research, September 19, 2013

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Somewhere in the Lester B. Pearson Building, Canada's foreign affairs headquarters, must be a meeting room with the inscription "The World Should Do as We Say, Not As We Do" or perhaps "Hypocrites 'R Us."

With the Obama administration beating the war drums, Canadian officials are demanding a response to the Syrian regime's alleged use of the chemical weapon sarin.

Last week Prime Minister Stephen Harper claimed "if it is not countered, it will constitute a precedent that we think is very dangerous for humanity in the long term" while for his part Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird declared: "If it doesn't get a response it's an open invitation for people, for Assad in Syria, or elsewhere to use these types of weapons that they've by and large refrained from doing since the First World War." The Conservatives also signed Canada onto a White House statement claiming: "The international norm against the use of chemical weapons is longstanding and universal."

While one may wish this were the case, it's not. In fact, Canada has repeatedly been complicit with the use of chemical weapons.

During the war in Afghanistan, Canadian troops used white phosphorus, which is a chemical agent that can cause deep tissue burning and death when inhaled or ingested in significant amounts. In an October 2008 letter to the *Toronto Star*, Corporal Paul Demetrick, a Canadian reservist, claimed Canadian forces used white phosphorus as a weapon against "enemy-occupied" vineyards. General Rick Hillier, former chief of the Canadian defence staff, confirmed the use of this defoliant. Discussing the difficulties of fighting the Taliban in areas with 10-foot tall marijuana plants, the general said: "We tried burning them with white phosphorous — it didn't work." After accusations surfaced of western forces (and the Taliban) harming civilians with white phosphorus munitions the Afghan government launched an investigation.

In a much more aggressive use of this chemical, Israeli forces fired white phosphorus shells during its January 2009 Operation Cast Lead that left some 1,400 Palestinians dead. Ottawa cheered on this 22-day onslaught against Gaza and the Conservatives have failed to criticize Israel for refusing to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological Weapons Convention. (*Editor's note: white phosphorous and Agent Orange are not considered chemical weapons by the Chemical Weapons Convention*)

For decades the massive Suffield Base in Alberta was one of the largest chemical and biological weapons research centres in the world. A 1989 Peace Magazine article explained, "For almost 50 years, scientists from the Department of National Defence have been as

busy as beavers expanding their knowledge of, and testing agents for, chemical and biological warfare (CBW) in southern Alberta.”

Initially led by Canadian and British scientists/soldiers, gradually the US military played a bigger role in the chemical weapons research at Suffield. A chemical warfare school began there in 1942 and it came to light that in 1966 US Air Force jets sprayed biological weapons simulants over Suffield to figure out how best to spray potentially fatal diseases on people. Until at least 1989 there were significant quantities of toxins, including sarin, stockpiled at the Alberta base. In 2006 former Canadian soldiers who claim to have been poisoned at Suffield launched a class action lawsuit against the Department of National Defense.

During the war in Vietnam, the US tested agents orange, blue, and purple at CFB Gagetown. A 1968 U.S. Army memorandum titled “defoliation tests in 1966 at base Gagetown, New Brunswick, Canada” explained: “The department of the army, Fort Detrick, Maryland, has been charged with finding effective chemical agents that will cause rapid defoliation of woody and Herbaceous vegetation. To further develop these objectives, large areas similar in density to those of interest in South East Asia were needed. In March 1965, the Canadian ministry of defense offered Crops Division large areas of densely forested land for experimental tests of defoliant chemicals. This land, located at Canadian forces base Gagetown, Oromocto, New Brunswick, was suitable in size and density and was free from hazards and adjacent cropland. The test site selected contained a mixture of conifers and deciduous broad leaf species in a dense undisturbed forest cover that would provide similar vegetation densities to those of temperate and tropical areas such as South East Asia.”

Between 1962 and 1971 US forces sprayed some 75,000,000 litres of material containing chemical herbicides and defoliants in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. One aim was to deprive the guerrillas of cover by defoliating forests and rural land. Another goal of these defoliation efforts was to drive peasants from the countryside to the US dominated cities, which would deprive the national resistance forces of their food supply and rural support.

In addition to assisting chemical warfare by testing Agent Orange, during the Vietnam war Canadian manufacturers sold the US military “polystyrene, a major component in napalm,” according to the book *Snow Job*. A chemical agent that can cause deadly burns, Napalm was widely deployed by US forces in their war against Southeast Asia.

This deadly chemical agent was also used during the Korean War, which saw 27,000 Canadian troops go to battle. A *New York Times* reporter, George Barrett, described the scene in a North Korean village after it was captured by US-led forces in February 1951: “A napalm raid hit the village three or four days ago when the Chinese were holding up the advance, and nowhere in the village have they buried the dead because there is nobody left to do so. This correspondent came across one old women, the only one who seemed to be left alive, dazedly hanging up some clothes in a blackened courtyard filled with the bodies of four members of her family.

“The inhabitants throughout the village and in the fields were caught and killed and kept the exact postures they had held when the napalm struck — a man about to get on his bicycle, fifty boys and girls playing in an orphanage, a housewife strangely unmarked, holding in her hand a page torn from a Sears Roebuck catalogue crayoned at Mail Order No. 3,811,294 for a \$2.98 ‘bewitching bed jacket — coral.’ There must be almost two hundred dead in the tiny hamlet.”

This NYT story captured the attention of Canadian External Affairs Minister Lester Pearson. In a letter to the Canadian ambassador in Washington, Hume Wrong, he wondered how it might affect public opinion and complained about it passing US media censors. “[Nothing could more clearly indicate] the dangerous possibilities of United States and United Nations action in Korea on Asian opinion than a military episode of this kind, and the way it was reported. Such military action was possibly ‘inevitable’ but surely we do not have to give publicity to such things all over the world. Wouldn’t you think the censorship which is now in force could stop this kind of reporting?”

No one denies that tens of thousands of liters of napalm were employed by UN forces in Korea. The use of biological weapons is a different story.

After the outbreak of a series of diseases at the start of 1952, China and North Korea accused the US of using biological weapons. Though the claims have neither been conclusively substantiated or disproven — some internal documents are still restricted — in *Orienting Canada*, John Price details the Canadian external minister’s highly disingenuous and authoritarian response to the accusations, which were echoed by some Canadian peace groups. While publicly highlighting a report that exonerated the US, Pearson concealed a more informed External Affairs analysis suggesting biological weapons could have been used. Additionally, when the *Ottawa Citizen* revealed that British, Canadian, and US military scientists had recently met in Ottawa to discuss biological warfare, Pearson wrote the paper’s owner to complain. Invoking national security, External Affairs “had it [the story] killed in the Ottawa Journal and over the CP [Canadian Press] wires.”

Price summarizes: “Even without full documentation, it is clear that the Canadian government was deeply involved in developing offensive weapons of mass destruction, including biological warfare, and that Parliament was misled by Lester Pearson at the time the accusations of biological warfare in Korea were first raised. We know also that the US military was stepping up preparations for deployment and use of biological weapons in late 1951 and that Canadian officials were well aware of this and actively supported it. To avoid revealing the nature of the biological warfare program and Canadian collaboration, which would have lent credence to the charges leveled by the Chinese and Korean governments, the Canadian government attempted to discredit the peace movement.”

International efforts to ban chemical weapons and to draw a “red line” over their use are a step forward for humanity. But this effort must include an accounting and opposition to Canada and its allies’ use of these inhumane weapons.

To have any credibility a country preaching against the use of chemical weapons must be able to declare: “Do as I do.”

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