

Breaking Bad Chemistry

By Polly Mann and Mary Beaudoin

The government of Syria was warned to get rid of its chemical weapons and soon, under threat of a military strike by the U.S. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) developed a timetable endorsed by the U.N. after a freinemy agreement between Russia and the U.S. According to this plan, the most critical of Syria's weapons must be transported out of Syria by December 31 of this year and destroyed by March 15 of next year. All other chemical materials must be eliminated by June 30.

So what is the process? One might ask the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers currently involved in getting rid of some chemical weapons here in the U.S. They are working just four miles from the White House in the affluent Washington, D.C. neighborhood of Spring Valley where a city environmental expert made a stunning discovery—evidence of several buried pits of toxic chemical weapons from World War I. According to a Northwest Washington community paper, *The Northwest Current*, the Army discovered “literally thousands of chemicals, vials, shells and mortar under Spring Valley.” One house in the residential area was destroyed by a wrecking crew in order to excavate the soil beneath it. Seven houses in the area are considered in “the danger zone.”



Student training for chemical destruction at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. This chemical production facility has since been destroyed.
Photo: U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency

An Army Corps of Engineers public service video explains the complex process with which the chemicals are being removed. Work is not expected to be completed until late next year. Even observing extreme caution, especially considering the location, the Corps felt compelled to state that alarms will “sound if deadly poisons should leak” and that ambulances will be at the ready to “take workers to the hospital.”

It is estimated that there are 250 such sites in 40 states. Before chemical weapons were banned, the United States buried, burned or dumped such munitions into the sea. In the early 1970s an international agreement outlawed dumping into the sea. In its 2012 report on dealing with these weapons, the National Research Council Board on Army Science and Technology stated: “Of greatest concern for the future are sites in residential areas and large sites on legacy military installations.” The chemical weapons at these sites are classified by the army as Nonstockpile Chemical

Weapons—the detritus of earlier wars and research no longer considered useful which have been buried in caches around the country.

The New York Times reported that getting rid of U.S. chemical weapons “has been more complex, more time-consuming, more costly and more environmentally fraught than anyone imagined.” The cost of all clean-up so far has been \$35.4 billion and there is no end in sight.

Chemical weapons and their use as WMD are narrowly defined by the Chemical Weapons Convention. Commonly mentioned are sarin, mustard gas and VX, all of which could be used as WMD. (The nerve agent VX is a member of the organophosphate family, similar to present day insecticides.) Exception has somehow been mysteriously made for the US using depleted uranium and white phosphorous in violation of the convention after it went into effect in 1997.

Other than Nonstockpile Chemical Weapons, the U.S. has had to deal with another category of weapons—Stockpile Weapons whose storage may be more analogous to the storage in Syria. These weapons were manufactured and stockpiled at U.S. Army warfare production facilities in North Carolina, Alabama, Colorado, Arkansas, Indiana and Maryland. The responsibility for their destruction was the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency (CMA) which states:

From the 1920s to the early 1990s, the United States produced an inventory of rockets, bomblets, land mines and other munitions capable of delivering nerve, blister and hallucinogenic chemical agents. The United States ended its chemical warfare program after entering into international agreements that led to a worldwide chemical weapons ban.

The Chemical Weapons Convention calls for the destruction of production facilities, as well as weapons, themselves. Syria, which signed the treaty, destroyed its facilities in approximately one month, meeting the November 1 deadline set by OPCW and the UN. AlJazeera reported inspectors saying that the destruction “could include smashing mixing equipment with sledgehammers, blowing up delivery missiles, driving tanks over empty shells or filling them with concrete, and running machines without lubricant so they become inoperable.” In the haste to stop Syria from having the capacity to produce weapons by a strict deadline, if it was necessary to employ such crude methods, this indicates that political expediency was valued over the safety, health and environmental issues that could affect the Syrian people.

But no such haste was required for the U.S. to destroy its manufacturing and mixing facilities. Although the U.S. ratified the Chemical Weapons Ban that went into effect in 1997, it was given until 2007 to destroy its own production facilities. (The last one of several was demolished at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland on December 28, 2006.) The situation isn't the same as in Syria because the U.S. had more and larger facilities—however, it still shows how countries are treated differently. And

Syria is operating under extraordinary conditions. The next rush will be to destroy its stockpile weapons comparatively fast.

The U.S. has yet to remove all of its stockpiles. Two stockpiles of deadly chemical weapons remain. The military says it will destroy them there but not by incineration as it has before. The Blue Grass Army Depot in Kentucky, according to the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency, “comprises 523 tons of nerve agents GB and VX, and mustard agent in projectiles, warheads and rockets.” The chemicals there are to be destroyed through a process of neutralization and water oxidation and the Army has until the year 2023. The other site is the Pueblo Chemical Depot in Colorado where chemicals are to be destroyed through a process of neutralization followed by biotreatment. The Denver Post reported last year that the Pueblo Depot “holds 700,000 munitions, some of which are prone to leak.” The Colorado Department of Health and the Environment tried to hold the Army to a deadline to destroy the waste, as well as to comply with state environmental regulations for handling and storing hazardous waste. However, courts ruled that the federal government has jurisdiction over states in regard to weapons.

Citizen concerns over the dangers inherent in weapons disposal reveal U.S. hypocrisy in that a.) it lays bare the fact that the U.S. had these chemical weapons for use b.) the U.S. still has chemical weapons like sarin, mustard gas and VX stockpiled that it has not yet gotten rid of in spite of being subject to the Chemical Weapons Convention Ban c.) the difficulty of getting rid of chemical weapons, and perhaps most of all d.) Syria, while dealing with 80+ foreign groups working to tear it asunder and existing under crippling sanctions, is being held to a tight deadline when the U.S., which has plenty of funding and domestic stability, has been taking many years to destroy its own weapons.

A Future Without Nonconventional Weapons (chemical, nuclear and biological)? The first solution proposed for getting rid of Syria’s chemical weapons shows the lack of foresight with which the demand was made. The plan was for getting them out of the country and into a NATO country. It was suggested that Albania take them, but the Albanian people protested passionately. Norway, claiming not to have the technical expertise to dispose of such chemicals, offered a ship to transport them out, but there was nowhere to transport them to as no country wants to take them. As of November 19, the latest discussion about how to deal with the weapons-without-a-country involved neutralizing them and disposing of them at sea on a ship or on an offshore rig. Given the difficulties, it is astounding that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on November 20 was actually advertising on its web site for volunteer funding and opening bids for private and state contractors to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons. You might wonder if the shame of placing an impossibly onerous burden on besieged Syria was too embarrassing for the U.S. because on November 29, OPCW announced that the U.S. offered to contribute “destruction technology, full operational support and financing to neutralise Syria’s priority chemicals.” But then a skeptic, familiar with history, might say offers of “help” and contractors always go hand in hand with occupiers entering countries.

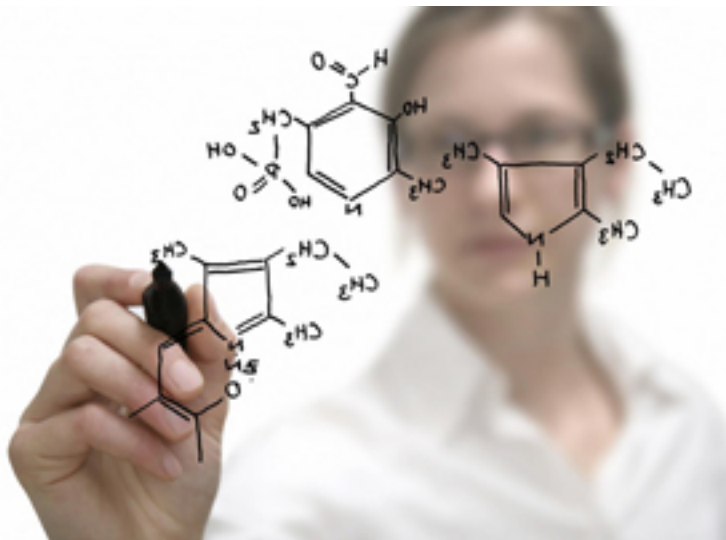


Photo: University of Texas Science Dept.

Yet in the short term, with a change in focus to the removal of chemical weapons, U.S. bombing of Syria was averted. Dr. Jean Pascal Zanders, a Senior Research fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies and a specialist who participates in working groups on chemical, biological and toxic weapons disarmament takes a long range view of recent developments with regard to Syria. He explains the hope he finds in recent developments:

"In the end, this international effort would strengthen the norm and international agreements against CW and their use in armed conflict much more than any military strike might be able to achieve. The operation, more than anything else under the present circumstances, could lay solid foundations to build a Middle East free from non-conventional weaponry, as desired by the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)."

Syria's neighbor Israel has yet to ratify (though it did sign) the Chemical Weapons Ban, and although it is widely known that it is the only power in the Middle East to actually possess nuclear weapons, it has not signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Sara Flounders of the International Action Center explained that chemical weapons are "the poor man's nuclear weapons" and that Syria had them stockpiled them as a means of defense against other countries. She went with a delegation, including former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and former U.S. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, to Syria in October. She points out that Israel, which occupies the Golan Heights only miles from Damascus and is a proxy for U.S. interests, has bombed Syria several times, but we don't hear about it in U.S. mainstream media. At the same time, she has something empowering to say for the U.S. peace movement: "Before the threatened US bombing, Congressional offices were overwhelmed with calls opposing any bombing. Rep. Nancy Pelosi knew she'd pay the price for

supporting the Obama proposal for cruise missile attack, so Congressional leaders avoided a vote. This gives hope regarding the power of citizen pressure.”

Our collective empowerment can work to put an end to our country’s hypocrisy about weapons and can fuel our efforts to stop future wars and occupations that are waged directly or through partner countries.

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Endnotes

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