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## Saddam's Chemical Weapons Campaign: Halabja, March 16, 1988

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Saddam Hussein is the first world leader in modern times to have brutally used chemical weapons against his own people. His goals were to systematically terrorize and exterminate the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, to silence his critics, and to test the effectiveness of his chemical and biological weapons. Hussein launched chemical attacks against 40 Kurdish villages and thousands of innocent civilians in 1987-88, using them as testing grounds. The worst of these attacks devastated the city of Halabja on March 16, 1988.

### Halabja Casualties

- 5,000 civilians, many of them women, children, and the elderly, died within hours of the attack. 10,000 more were blinded, maimed, disfigured, or otherwise severely and irreversibly debilitated.
- Thousands died of horrific complications, debilitating diseases, and birth defects in the years after.

### Immediate Medical Effects in Halabja

- Death by asphyxiation
- Skin burns and blisters
- Impaired vision, blindness
- Breathing difficulty, respiratory shutdown
- Vomiting, diarrhea, digestive shutdown
- Neurological disorder
- Convulsions, coma

### Long-term Medical Effects

- Permanent blindness
- Disfigurement
- Respiratory, digestive, and neurological disorders
- Leukemia, lymphoma, and colon, breast, lung, skin, and other cancers
- Increased miscarriages and infertility
- Severe congenital malformations and other birth defects

### Chemical Weapons Used

Saddam's regime purposefully mixed mustard gas and nerve agents to magnify their initial and long-term effects.

- **Mustard gas**, a blistering agent, affects membranes of the nose, throat, and lungs.
- Nerve agents such as **sarin**, **tabun**, and **VX** attack eyes and respiratory tracts.
- Chemical weapons contaminate the food and water supplies, soil, and animal populations.

### Halabja: A Testing Ground

Iraqi soldiers in protective gear returned to Halabja to study the effectiveness of their weapons and attacks. They divided the city into grids, determining the number and location of the dead and extent of injury. Halabja helped Saddam Hussein gauge the ability of his chemical agents to kill, maim, and terrorize population centers.

*"Iraqi government troops would be surrounding the attack site and they would have chem-bio suits on...included would be doctors and interested observers...they would go in and find out how many people were dead...and how many survived. What ages ...did men, women or children or the elderly suffer more? From there they would shoot the survivors and burn the bodies..."*

Dr. Christine Gosden, Liverpool University,  
who has developed treatment and research programs for Halabja survivors

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