

Burma: A critical look at those chemical weapons claims

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For decades, insurgents, refugees and others in Myanmar claimed that the armed forces had used chemical weapons (CW) against them. Despite credible reports of a pilot CW program back in the 1970s, and subsequent efforts by various activist groups, none of these claims could be proven. This issue arose again in early 2014, when two Myanmar journalists claimed they had discovered a secret CW plant.

Since the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, strategic analysts monitoring developments in Burma (Myanmar) have been on quite a rollercoaster ride, particularly with regard to WMD.

Over the past 25 years, both the former military regime and President Thein Sein's reformist government have been accused of developing a nuclear device, manufacturing ballistic missiles, deploying biological agents and using CW.¹ These capabilities were reportedly acquired mainly with the help of North Korea and China.

¹ Andrew Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Claims, Controversies and Consequences*, Associate Paper (Perth: Future Directions International, 9 August 2012), www.futuredirections.org.au/files/Associate%20Papers/FDI_Associate_Paper_-_09_August_2012.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/burma-and-weapons-of-mass-destruction-claims-controversies-and-consequences/].

Such is the dearth of reliable information about Burma's armed forces and national security that it has been difficult to prove or disprove many of these claims. However, enough of them have been shown to be exaggerated or false to warrant a fair degree of caution when considering any fresh accusations of WMD production or use.

With that in mind, it is worth looking closely at reports in the news media over the past few weeks that a secret CW plant has been discovered in Burma.

The Rangoon-based *Unity Journal* has claimed that, in 2009, a CW factory was built on 12 square kilometres of land confiscated from farmers in Pauk township, near Pakokku in central Burma. Citing local informants, the journal said the complex (possibly known as DI-24) included more than 300 metres of tunnels and was receiving technical help from China.²

Following publication of this story, four journalists and one *Unity Journal* executive were charged under the 1923 *State Secrets Act*, which prohibits trespassing on and photographing defence facilities in Burma and divulging classified information.³ All unsold copies of the weekly journal were seized. Naypyidaw also flatly denied the existence of any CW plant.

Local news outlets have highlighted the perceived attack on freedom of the press in Burma, which has been vigorously exploited since Thein Sein relaxed controls on the media in 2012.⁴ International observers seem more concerned about the apparent revelation of a CW plant⁵ and Burma's failure to ratify the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).⁶

Some background to the latest claims and Burma's current CWC status might help put these issues into perspective.

2 Zarni Mann and Samantha Michaels, 'Burma Govt Rejects Report of Secret Chemical Weapons Factory', *The Irrawaddy*, 4 February 2014, www.irrawaddy.org/burma/burma-govt-rejects-report-secret-chemical-weapons-factory.html.

3 Yen Saning, 'Sixth Unity Journal Staffer Detained for Questioning', *The Irrawaddy*, 5 February 2014, www.irrawaddy.org/burma/sixth-unity-journal-staffer-detained-questioning.html.

4 'Burma (Myanmar)', in *Freedom of the Press 2013* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2013), www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/burma [page discontinued] [now at freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202013%20Full%20Report.pdf].

5 Luke Hunt, 'Pardon, Was That a Chemical Weapons Factory in Myanmar?', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 7 February 2014, thediplomat.com/2014/02/pardon-was-that-a-chemical-weapons-factory-in-myanmar/.

6 Joshua Kurlantzik, 'Chemical Weapons in Myanmar?', *Asia Unbound* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2014), blogs.cfr.org/asia/2014/02/10/chemical-weapons-in-myanmar/.

Since the mid 1980s, several ethnic armed groups have claimed to be the victims of chemical warfare. They have described attacks by the Burmese armed forces with mortars, artillery, rockets and air-delivered bombs that left insurgents and displaced communities with symptoms including dizziness, nausea, rashes and, in some cases, partial paralysis. There do not seem to have been any fatalities.

Such claims continued to be made after Thein Sein's inauguration in March 2011. In June, for example, Shan insurgents reported that they had been bombarded with artillery shells containing noxious chemicals.⁷ Also in 2011, Kachin groups said they had been subjected to 'yellow rain' and 'toxic gas'.⁸ Similar claims were made in 2012.⁹

Without independent expert testimony and rigorous scientific analysis, which have so far been lacking, such reports are almost impossible to verify. It has even been difficult to determine what kinds of chemical agents, if any, may have been employed. Some descriptions have been consistent with the use of white phosphorus, tear gas or even toxic defoliants.

That said, claims of CW use have had some support. In 1984, Western newspapers cited what was reportedly a leaked US Special National Security Intelligence Estimate stating that the Ne Win regime had been trying to produce mustard gas since 1981. A West German firm was said to be assisting with the construction of a pilot plant in Burma, with additional equipment imported from Italy.

It was later reported that the US had forced this project to close—in part, by putting pressure on Bonn. No evidence was ever provided to suggest that any chemical agents had been produced, weaponised or tested. However, as late as 1993, Burma was being listed by some US agencies as possibly having an offensive CW capability.¹⁰

7 'Fears Mount Over Chemical Weapons Use', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 8 June 2011, www.dvb.no/news/fears-mount-over-chemical-weapons-use/16018 [page discontinued].

8 Naw Noreen, "Yellow Rain" Fuels Chemical Weapons Fears', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 25 November 2011, www.dvb.no/news/%E2%80%98yellow-rain%E2%80%99-fuels-chemical-weapon-fears/18917 [page discontinued].

9 'Burma Denies Using Chemical Weapons in Kachin', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 10 January 2013, www.dvb.no/news/burma-denies-using-chemical-weapons-in-kachin/25671 [page discontinued].

10 Walter Friedenber, 'Chemical Warfare Gaining Acceptance in Some Nations', *Deseret News*, [Salt Lake City], 10 September 1988, www.deseretnews.com/article/18676/CHEMICAL-WARFARE-GAINING-ACCEPTANCE-IN-SOME-NATIONS.html?pg=all.

More recently, a few US politicians have referred to Burmese CW use, but this has been in the context of unconfirmed press reports.¹¹ Also, the issue has usually been raised in an attempt to discredit Naypyidaw's reform program and the Obama administration's engagement policy. Once again, no evidence was provided to support such claims.

For their part, successive Burmese governments have consistently denied having a CW capability and using CW against domestic opponents. Officials have pointed out that Burma has been a strong supporter of the CWC, which it signed in 1993. Some have been of the view that, as Burma was then directly ruled by a military council, this automatically included ratification.

Despite all the claims made over the years, some of which included descriptions of purported CW facilities,¹² the fact remains that no one really knows whether Burma has ever developed a CW capability or has used CW against armed ethnic groups. There is simply not enough reliable information available from public sources either to dismiss these claims or to confirm them.

As regards the latest reports, it is possible that the site investigated by the *Unity Journal* journalists was another kind of defence industrial plant, as claimed by a government spokesman. Many such facilities have been built since 1988, often for unknown purposes. A number have 'tunnels'; and Burmese authorities have always been very sensitive to breaches of security.

It has been argued that Thein Sein's reforms make chemical weapons 'near redundant'.¹³ Burma's circumstances have certainly changed, but CW have enduring strategic applications. If Naypyidaw is developing ballistic missiles, as many suspect, possession of a chemical warhead would constitute a strong deterrent and a powerful bargaining chip in international negotiations.

11 Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chairwoman, 'Ros-Lehtinen Expresses Concern about Atrocities in Burma, Possible Connections to North Korea, and Secretary Clinton Trip', House Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 29 November 2011, archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/news/story/?2103 [page discontinued].

12 'Burma Military's Hidden Chemical Weapons Factories', *Blogspot*, 18 December 2011, burmachemicalweapons.blogspot.com.au/.

13 Elliot Brennan, 'Why Myanmar Needs to Ratify the Weapons Conventions', *The Interpreter*, 7 February 2014, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/02/07/Why-Myanmar-needs-to-ratify-the-Weapons-Conventions.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-myanmar-needs-to-ratify-weapons-conventions].

It is in this context that Burma's ratification of the CWC has become more pressing. Last year, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons conducted a 'national awareness workshop' in Naypyidaw. The Burmese Government later announced that it would ratify the convention—a decision that has recently been reconfirmed.¹⁴

This step would doubtless be presented as evidence of Burma's readiness to be a good international citizen and, as such, would be applauded by many. However, it is unlikely to have any appreciable impact on domestic political developments. Indeed, as long as Naypyidaw continues to deny any past CW attacks, ratification will be seen by most ethnic groups as little more than a public relations exercise.

Another reason ratification of the CWC is unlikely to attract unqualified approval is that, despite repeated protestations to the contrary, Burma maintains military ties with North Korea.¹⁵ Thein Sein's government could accede to all the international instruments relating to WMD but, as long as that issue remains unresolved, suspicions about Naypyidaw's bona fides are bound to remain.

14 'Burma Preparing to Ratify Chemical Weapons Ban: Ye Htut', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 14 February 2014, www.dvb.no/news/burma-preparing-to-ratify-chemical-weapons-ban-ye-htut-burma-myanmar/37250 [page discontinued].

15 Andrew Selth, 'Burma and North Korea: Again? Still?', *The Interpreter*, 10 July 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still].

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