

Halabja Women Victims Complain of Neglect

Survivors of the chemical attack say they've received little or no medical treatment. Women who suffered chronic illnesses in the wake of a horrific chemical attack nearly 20 years ago say they have been largely neglected.

Of those who survived Saddam Hussein's chemical attacks against the town of Halabja in 1988, many developed ovarian or cervical cancer - and have since died; or suffer from depression or psychiatric-related problems. In addition, some became infertile, while others gave birth to handicapped and stillborn babies

"I have difficulties sleeping at night," said Mahbooha Faraj, a 47-year-old woman who survived the attack. She now suffers from respiratory and eye problems, and believes that the attack made her infertile.

"One of my eyes is getting weak, and I have not been able to give birth," she said.

Faraj, like many of Halabja's victims, has been told that she requires treatments outside of Iraq, yet no one has helped her to receive medical aid.

In March 1988, Saddam's military dropped a deadly cocktail of mustard gas and nerve agents sarin, Tabun and possibly VX, on Halabja, a town of about 80,000 people near the Iranian border.

The attack, which occurred at the end of the Iran-Iraq war killing 5,000 people and injuring thousands more, is considered the largest-scale chemical weapons attack against a civilian population. The US, which supported Saddam during the war, at first blamed Iran, and later held Saddam responsible.

Since the attack, only one major study on the affects of the attack has been conducted - and that was a decade ago. The health care system there remains in shambles and few residents have access to quality basic care, let alone specialised treatment.

Halabja's medical care is sub-standard by all accounts. Although the Kurdistan Regional Government has promised to build a hospital, costing 13 million US dollars, a building contractor has not yet been chosen, said KRG minister of health Dr Zryan Osman.

Thousands complain of health problems, including skin ailments and blindness; aggressive cancers; severe respiratory problems; congenital malformations, such as heart defects; as well as physical and mental handicaps.

Women say they are particularly neglected because there are few female medical specialists inside or around Halabja to treat the unique reproductive problems and cancers which many have.

The Society for Chemical Weapons Victims of Halabja estimates that around 300 people are in critical condition. The organisation has no statistics on how many of those are women.

As a result of its lobbying, the KRG recently agreed to send 69 patients - about half of whom are women - to Iran for diagnosis and treatment. Two have since died, however - both of them women.

Kamil Abdulqadir Waiss, a representative of the society and himself a victim of the chemical attacks, said that more studies need to be conducted to better understand the type and scope of the medical problems suffered by Halabja residents.

He said that female victims need specialists and that research must be carried out to measure the effects the chemicals have had on children.

While many hoped - and continue to hope - that the US would provide support for the chemical weapons victims after overthrowing Saddam in 2003, the town has received little American aid.

Residents protested at the lack of support for Halabja last year, clashing with Kurdish forces. A teenage boy was killed during the demonstration and a monument honouring the victims was burned.

Dr Ako Saeed, director-general of health for the Sharazoor area, the centre of which is Halabja, said the lack of research into the conditions suffered by the victims is the biggest obstacle to progress.

At present, doctors can only speculate at this point about the links between women's health problems in Halabja and the chemical attacks, he said.

"Day after day their health worsens," he said. "Their vision is weakening and some of them may go blind."

Osman defended the government against charges that it has neglected victims, saying the problem is a lack of international expertise.

"There are not many international experts who know about the effects of chemical weapons, which is why [the government] has not been able to bring experts to Halabja to do research," he said.

As the months and years have passed, many of Halabja's women victims have been left to suffer often agonising pain.

Taban Ali, 38, was pregnant during the chemical attack. She gave birth to a girl, but has since been infertile. She also has a rash and respiratory problems - two of the most common health complaints of Halabja's victims.

"I wait for death every night when I go to bed," she said, pulling up her sleeve to reveal red spots on her skin.

And her depression is overwhelming. Ali, who lost her entire family in the attack, said the hardest thing for her to accept is that her daughter will never have any siblings.

“I often burst into tears when I think about my daughter’s life,” she said. “She will spend her life like me, without brothers and sisters.”

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