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INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
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रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Chemical Concerns: Raising Suspicion About Myanmar's Covert CW Capability

Mr. Animesh Roul

The author is a founding member and presently, the Executive Director of research at the Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, New Delhi.

Summary

Myanmar has once again faced accusations of having a clandestine chemical weapons capability and non-compliance, despite the country's efforts to fulfil its obligation under the Chemical Weapons Convention. Even though Myanmar has rejected the latest US allegations, the questions regarding its intact and existing buildings at Tonbo Site and the suspicions about a clandestine chemical weapons factory in Pauk Township will haunt the authorities in Myanmar to come clean before the International community.

In late November 2019, the US Representative Thomas DiNanno raised Myanmar's non-compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in a statement to the 24th CSP (Conference of State Parties) at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in the Hague (Netherlands). DiNanno, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Defence Policy, Emerging Threats, and Outreach in the Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Bureau at present, said that the South East Asian nation has failed to declare its past chemical weapons programme and failed to destroy its chemical weapons production facility.

There is no clear evidence to suggest that Myanmar has a chemical weapons (CW) programme at present, although there were allegations in the past about it. Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) signed the CWC in 1993, an international treaty that outlaws the production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons. The Myanmar government ratified the treaty after almost two decades in July 2015 to become 191st member of the CWC. At that time, Myanmar's Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin in his address to the Executive Council of the OPCW had said in clear terms that his country is committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Convention and would cooperate with other State Parties to bring about a world completely free of chemical weapons.¹ He had blamed domestic circumstances and capacity constraints for the 20-year delay in ratifying the treaty.

However, the basis of the recent US position on Myanmar stems from the controversial chemical weapons capability and its past weapons programme. Evidently, Myanmar had a sulphur mustard development programme among other suspicious CW

agents in the 1980s and that the US thinks the country may still have a chemical weapons stockpile at its old chemical weapons facility. According to the US Myanmar may have CW agent and past production equipment intact at its past CWPF (Chemical weapon production facility) in Tonbo, located South-East of the national capital, Naypyidaw (Nay Pyi Taw). Besides the historical CW program at Tonbo, the US also suspects that there may be a couple of CW sites, Myanmar has never disclosed.²

The United States has at regular intervals conveyed its concerns to the government of Myanmar and the powerful military, since 1991. Also, Myanmar's military junta was blamed for alleged chemical attacks against anti-government Karenni ethnic rebels in February 2005.³ Besides, there were also several allegations regarding Myanmar's secret CW arsenals.⁴

These past allegations and unverified suspicions notwithstanding, two major events in the last decade have aroused suspicion about Myanmar's existing industrial capability and willingness to use or produce CW having covert CW facilities. In November 2012, anti-riot police used white phosphorus (WP) agents against civilian protesters at the Letpadaung mine (the Monywa copper mining complex) in Sagaing.⁵ The large scale use of WP, which is not listed as chemical weapon agent under the CWC or prohibited by any other international treaties, inflicted serious burn injuries on the protesters. This incident was criticised by the US State department at that time. The then State Department Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland urged Myanmar government to exercise restraint and discouraged to use chemical agents such as WP as a crowd control measure. She was quoted as saying, "We have opposed the use of phosphorus as a crowd control agent [...] and this phosphorus ... can be quite damaging

to humans. There are other crowd control elements that are better suited."⁶ The WP instance though did not confirm anything related to CW capabilities of Myanmar, it raised suspicion about its chemical industry, production capacity and covert foreign suppliers. Also, the prevalent intent of powerful military regarding the use of chemical agents in the guise of riot control against civilians or dissenters.

Myanmar's military came under international scanner for alleged chemical weapon stockpile in early 2014 when five local journalists were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for writing an article accusing the military of producing chemical weapons secretly. The report titled "A secret chemical weapon factory of the former generals, Chinese technicians and the commander-in-chief at Pauk Township" published in a weekly news journal 'Unity' was about a chemical weapons factory in Pauk Township, Magwe Division. The report that contained photographic details and residents' remarks stated that the factory frequented by top military and political officials may be producing chemical weapons. The factory was built in 2009 on more than 3,000 acres of land that was confiscated from farmers, and that it was connected by over 1,000 feet of tunnels.⁷ However, the Myanmar government rejected the chemical weapon aspect of the report as 'baseless' but accepted that it was 'just a defence-related factory and protected under the Official Secrets Act.'⁸ Unfortunately, these two incidents were overlooked by the OPCW, as there is no evidence to suggest that the organisation took cognizance of these events.

The much open statement at the OPCW in November 2019 was not the first time that the US cited Myanmar's name for having a clandestine chemical weapons capability. In February 2019, the US urged Myanmar to declare its past programme to the OPCW,

remove this potential proliferation issue, and come into compliance with the CW Convention.⁹

Myanmar's military since then has rejected the US claims of any clandestine chemical weapon stockpile in its secret arsenals. The military (Tatmadaw) spokesman Brig. Gen. Zaw Min Tun summarily rejected that Myanmar ever had a CBRN programme and clarified to the media that the military hasn't had any programme relating to chemical weapons before or after the country's ratification of the CWC. To note, Myanmar ratified the CWC in 2015. If US claims are true and both Tonbo and Pauk Township facilities are covertly operational, then Myanmar is breaching its treaty obligations.

The CWC and the OPCW, now over two decades 'Young', have achieved many laurels only because of the most noble purpose - 'to make the world free of chemical weapons.' However, the threats and challenges posed by 'insincere' Nation States and of course by terrorist groups, remain unchanged and would possibly continue to be so in the future too, posing hard challenges for both the OPCW and the international community.

Endnotes:

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