

Ethiopia and Syria: International Community's Contradictory Responses to the Use of Poison Gas*

By Kidane Alemayehu

Inconsistency Regarding Victims of Poison Gas Warfare

The international community including the United Nations and members of the UN Security Council are fully engaged with the recent use of banned chemical weapons by Syria's Bashir Al-Assad regime against its own people. A policy of accountability was witnessed in other cases involving the use of chemical weapons, e.g. by Iraq against the Kurds; by Nazi Germany against Jewish inmates; by Japan against China; by Egypt against Yemen, etc.

In a stunning contrast to the above, the loss of at least 15,000 Ethiopian lives as a result of nearly 5,000 chemical weapon bombs dropped by Fascist Italy during its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-36 has never received the international community's attention or response.

The Case of Syria

The news are replete these days of the repeated atrocities committed by the Syrian regime, led by President Assad, against its own people by using various weapons including poison gas. The latest such attack, through the application of poison gas, is reported to have resulted in the loss of 1,400 Syrian lives including 400 children. The civil war going on in Syria has so far brought about the massacre of 100,000 Syrians, and the fleeing of about 2 million people as refugees to neighboring countries including Jordan and Turkey. The international community, especially the governments of the United States, France, and some Arab countries have expressed their outrage against the Syrian regime's criminal acts and are in the process of initiating an appropriate action that would deter and inhibit any future use of poison gas in the country. On the other hand, some countries such as Russia and China are expressing, despite the prevailing evidence, reservation as to the veracity of the claim that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own people. Nevertheless, it can be stated conclusively that the international community deserves appreciation for its stance and action including diplomatic and economic sanctions against the Syrian government in support of the Syrian people, victims of a brutal regime.

The Case of Ethiopia

It is a historic fact that the Fascist Italian Government led by Mussolini applied chemical weapons in its criminal warfare against Ethiopia. In their article: "The Use of Chemical Weapons in the 1935-36 Italo-Ethiopian War", Lina Grip and John Hart stated that "...4336 aerial bombs filled with sulphur mustard and 540 aerial bombs filled with diphenylchloroarsine had been used against Ethiopian forces".

*Although the author is responsible for the contents of this article, the useful comments and suggestions by Amb. Alemayehu Abebe, Dr. Mikael Wossen, Prof. Don Levene, and Prof. Theodore Vestal are duly acknowledged and appreciated.

The article (by Grip and Hart) also presents the following list of locations which were bombed by the Fascists with chemical weapons:

“Ethiopian towns attacked with chemical weapons in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War

Town Date of attack
Takkaze 22 Dec. 1935
Amba Alaa 26 Dec. 1935
Borena 31 Dec. 1935
Sokota 10 Jan. 1936
Makale 21 Jan. 1936
Megalo Feb. 1936^a
Waldia Road 27 Feb. 1936
Quoram 16 Mar. 1936
Ylanserer 17 Mar. 1936
Quoram 17–18 Mar. 1936
Irga Alem 19–21 Mar. 1936
Indomahoni 29–30 Mar. 1936
Quoram 4–7 Apr. 1936

^a The exact day was not available to the Ethiopian Government.

Source: League of Nations, Letter, dated April 13th, 1936, from the Ethiopian Representative to the Secretary-General, 13 Apr. 1936, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Annex 1592, Apr. 1936, pp. 479–80.”

In his book entitled: “My Life and Ethiopia’s Progress”, 1929 E.C., Emperor Haile Selassie I, had stated:

“The picture of many thousands of soldiers as well as rural people including women and children who were burned to death by the poison gas used by the enemy is still etched in our mind.” (p. 244)

“Italian airplanes came in drones of 9, 15, and 18 to drop rains of poison gas on people, animals, rivers and streams as well as pastures.” (p. 255)

A.J. Barker states in “The Rape of Ethiopia 1936”, p. 56 that Ethiopian soldiers were not familiar with the “terrible rain that burned and killed”. It can be stated that if it were not for the use of the internationally forbidden poison gas by the invading Fascist forces, the Italians would have suffered a second defeat at the hands of the Ethiopians similar to the war of Adowa in 1896.

Figures as to the number of Ethiopian people killed by the Fascist chemical weapons are sparse but one quoted from Russian sources in the above article (Grip and Hart), and a figure presented by The Economist (please see hereunder), is a mere 15,000. Considering that 4,876 bombs containing chemical weapons were dropped on populated areas and groups of Ethiopian soldiers, it is obviously difficult to accept the ratio of a mere three persons killed per bomb!

The loss in human lives and devastation in terms of destroyed buildings and environmental pollution as a result of the Fascist war crimes in Ethiopia was immense. The specific data are as follows:

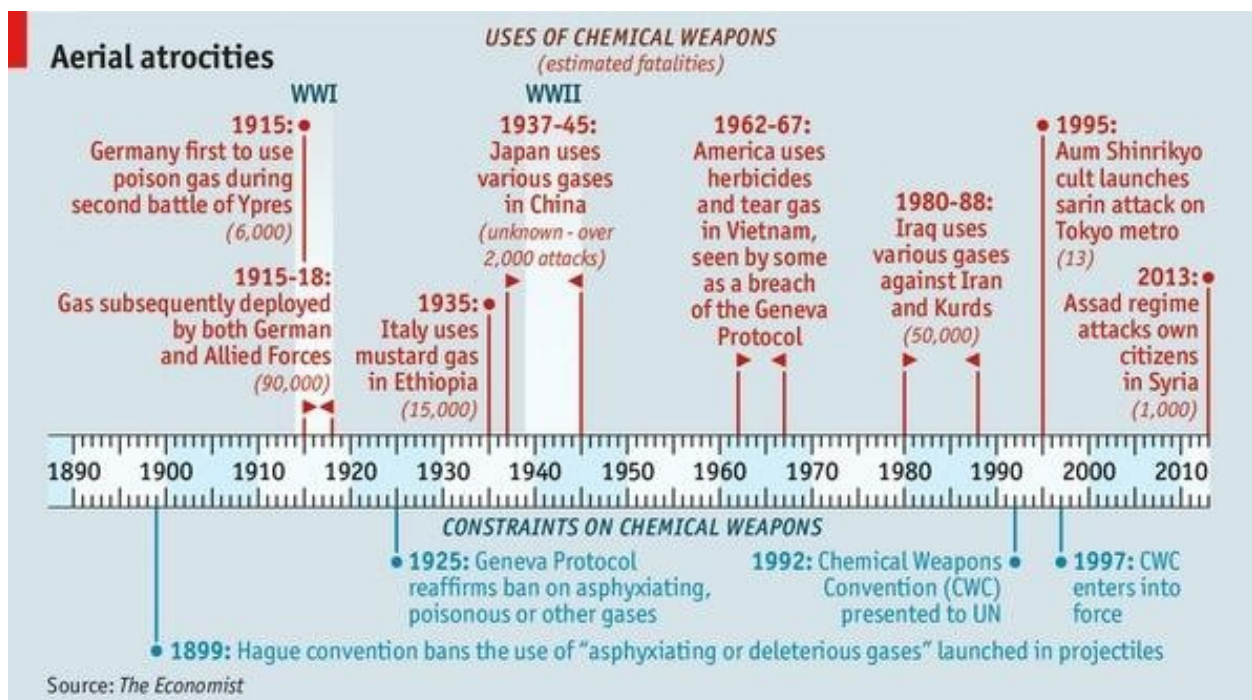
1. 1 million Ethiopians massacred of whom 30,000 within only three days in Addis Ababa;

2. 2,000 churches destroyed;
3. 525,000 homes destroyed;
4. 14 million animals killed;
5. An extensive environmental pollution in forests, rivers and lakes due to the mustard gas;
6. Looting of Ethiopian properties by the Fascist Italians as well as the Vatican which had also blessed the Fascist army.

Despite the above huge war crimes, in complete contradiction to the huge hue and cry going on now about the Syrian Government's use of chemical weapons against its own people, the international community has virtually done nothing against the culprits. The heads of the invading Fascist army, Marshal Badoglio and General Graziani were never brought to justice for their war crimes in Ethiopia. The former general was accepted as a partner by the Allies. As if to add insult to injury, Graziani's legacy was given a high prominence recently as a mausoleum was inaugurated in his name, in the presence of a Vatican representative, at Affile, a town southeast of Rome, on August 11, 2012. **Justice continues to be denied to the Ethiopian people.**

International Laws Against the Use of Chemical Weapons

The Hague Convention of 1899 was the first instrument that forbade the use of chemical weapons. That was followed by the Geneva Protocol of 1925 forbidding the use of poison gases. The United Nations convened the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1992 which resulted in its enforcement in 1997. Therefore, the Italian Fascist Government used chemical weapons in its war crimes in Ethiopia in utter disregard of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. For more details of the various conventions and the atrocities committed in various countries, please see the graphic presentation by The Economist hereunder (kindly shared by Ambassador Alemayehu Abebe):



Ethiopia: Abandoned, Then Supported in The Defeat of the Fascists!

Prior to and during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie I had appealed to the League of Nations, as one of its member countries, to stand by Ethiopia against the Italian invasion. In a betrayal of historic proportions, the League of Nations, especially Britain and France sided with the Fascists. USA, then led by President Roosevelt adopted a policy of neutrality. As if this were not enough, sanctions were imposed on the victim i.e. Ethiopia while oil supplies and access to the Red Sea were facilitated for the Italian regime.

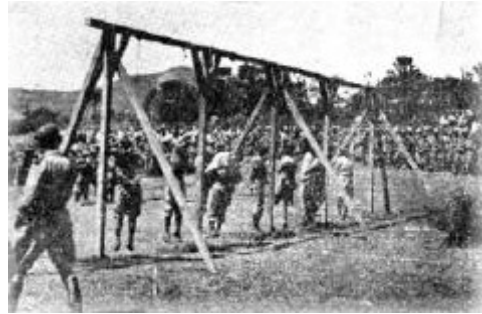
It was only when Mussolini and his Fascist regime sided with Hitler and attacked the Allies that Britain reversed its policy and supported Ethiopia i.e. Emperor Haile Selassie I and the patriots in getting rid of the Italian Fascists from Ethiopia. For this unforgettable support of liberation, Britain deserves the utmost respect and appreciation, despite its failed attempt to colonize the southern and eastern parts of Ethiopia after the Italians were kicked out. It is also appropriate to express appreciation to the soldiers who were part of the British army that was deployed to fight against the Italians in Ethiopia from South Africa, Nigeria, the Sudan, and India. Another important event worth remembering is the support extended by African/Americans who, despite President Roosevelt's policy of neutrality, demonstrated against the Italian invasion as well as the contribution of John C. Robinson ("the Brown Condor") who personally joined the Ethiopian patriots as a pilot in the fight against the Italian Fascists.

Justice For Ethiopia

Ethiopia has not received the justice that it deserves for the huge crimes it has suffered as a result of the unprovoked war crimes committed by Italy with the complicit support of the Vatican.



A Vatican priest blessing the Fascist Army



Fascists and their atrocities against Ethiopian patriots

The Global Alliance For Justice – The Ethiopian Cause (www.globalallianceforethiopia.org) is in the process of achieving five main objectives:

1. A Vatican apology for its complicity with the Fascists (please see an international petition being signed in the above website);
2. Adequate reparations by the Italian government to the Ethiopian people (Italy has agreed to compensate Libya by paying \$5 billion);
3. Restitution of properties looted by the Vatican and Italy to the Ethiopian people;
4. Inclusion of the Fascist war crimes in Ethiopia in the historic records of the United Nations; and
5. The dismantlement of the monument for “the butcher of Ethiopia”, Rodolfo Graziani.

It is hoped that the international community i.e. the UN and its member countries, the European Union and the African Union as well as all people who believe in human rights will facilitate the justice that has been due to the Ethiopian people for over 75 years.