

# Sardasht gas Attack

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On the 28th of June 1987, at 16:30 local time, the silence of the small town of Sardasht was broken by Iraqi airplanes that targeted the city with seven mustard gas (MG) bombs. Two bombs hit the town bazaar and two other bombs were dropped on residential areas.

Three bombs fell in gardens on the outskirts of the city. Because of climate conditions and mild winds, mustard gas contamination gradually scattered across areas kilometers away from where the bombs fell. The bombed areas were overwhelmed with the unpleasant smell of MG (described by witnesses to smell like sulphur and garlic). Contamination of food, water, farms and animals resulted in gastrointestinal problems and devastated the sole source of income for many families.

Unfortunately, the city hospital was located in a contaminated area and had to be evacuated. Electricity and telephone systems were also down. Military medics aided by local volunteers managed to use two public baths supplied by the fire brigade to treat victims. A gymnasium was used as a makeshift treatment centre with 150 beds.

Due to the persistent nature of MG, the number of casualties grew as the hours passed, in contrast with nerve agents that cause a sudden burst in the number of casualties within the first few hours. Basic life support was administered to the victims and, once they became stable enough to be moved, they would be transported to local major cities (Urmia and Tabriz) for secondary care. A day after the attack, stable victims were flown again from the cities of Urmia and Tabriz to Tehran.

We witnessed rather a distressing scene at Tehran Mehrabad airport as children of different ages were moaning and screaming with swollen eyes while trying to stick to their mothers. Many ill victims were moved to Baghiatollah hospital. Some children were comatose with heart rates exceeding 160 beats per minute, although their skin did not show much florid manifestations.

A 4-year-old boy who had just been admitted had a cardiac arrest and unfortunately did not respond to CPR. We spent that entire night visiting Sardasht victims in many hospitals in Tehran.

Despite presenting the United Nations Security Council with numerous reports on this attack and its casualties, unfortunately no envoy was sent to evaluate this incident. One of the reports contained numerous graphic pictures of the victims.

According to official reports, 8025 out of the 12000 residents of Sardasht were affected by the chemical attack. At least 4500 of the victims required treatment, of whom 3000 were treated locally and spent the next few weeks in neighboring towns and villages until their homes were cleared of contamination.

The remaining victims (1500 people) required hospital care and were therefore transferred out of Sardasht. 600 victims were sent to Tehran, of whom 420 were discharged within 7-10 days after

admission. The remaining 180 victims were seriously injured; some died and some suffered with long-term effects on their lungs. In total, 130 people died. 20 died in Sardasht within a few hours of the attack, 10 passed away while being transferred to other cities, and the remaining 100 died 7-30 days after the attack.

The victims' rapidly deteriorating condition was an especially agonizing feature of mustard gas exposure. We could talk to a victim with ease one day and then watch helplessly as the patient became comatose and perished the next. Many victims were kept alive via ventilator for 7-10 days and then died of a cardiac or pulmonary failure. Family members and even medical staff would find these deaths extremely distressing primarily because they were accompanied by severe facial disfiguration. Severely swollen eyelids and large blisters on the face of the victims would terrify their family members and acquaintances.



Acute manifestation of exposure to MG in a boy from Sardasht

Six members of one family (the Assadzades) who lived just five meters away from one bombing site in Sardasht all perished within 10 days of the attack. The mother, father, three boys ages 4, 14 and 16 and three girls ages 7, 18 and 22 all died. The only living member of this family is a son who, at the time of the assault, was serving his military service in another city.

### **Reference:**

Foroutan A .Sardasht event in medical experiences of Iraq's chemical warfare, Baqiyatallah university of medical Science press, Tehran, Iran: 2003: 183-187 (Persian)