

VIEWS & REVIEWS

PERSONAL VIEW

Tear gas is a chemical weapon, and Turkey should not use it to torture civilians

Peaceful protests in cities throughout Turkey have been met with violence from police. The president of the Turkish Medical Association, **Ahmet Ozdemir Aktan**, calls for an end to inappropriate use of chemical agents

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Millions of Turkish citizens are outraged by the violent interference of the government in peaceful protests aimed at saving Istanbul's Gezi Park.¹ Within a few days this turned into an outcry from protesters all over Turkey, asking for more democracy and freedom from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and, particularly, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan.

The secular and educated sections of Turkish society are unhappy and frustrated because new laws have been passed that interfere with lifestyles—for example, religion based schools have been encouraged, and a recent law almost forbids drinking alcohol outside the home. With the AKP having a solid majority in the Turkish parliament, these laws have been passed without any due discussion, and many see these as part of Erdogan's plan to transform Turkish society into some form of Islamic state.

To subdue protesters, excessive use of tear gas, water cannon, and police force is common. As of 7 June 2013, after 10 days of demonstrations, there have been three deaths, two protesters died from head trauma and a police officer fell off a bridge while chasing protesters. Ten patients are still in intensive care units; two are critical. In 13 cities, 4785 people have been treated as outpatients in public and private hospitals plus makeshift infirmaries set up by the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) and staffed by volunteer doctors, nurses, and medical students. More than 50 patients needed surgery for head trauma, eye injuries, splenic injury, and fractures.

Excessive use of tear gas has been the most striking symbol of police violence. According to official reports, two types are used in Turkey: chlorobenzalmalononitrile (CS) and oleoresin capsicum (OC, also known as pepper gas). These gases are defined as chemical weapons, and their use should be restricted because they can cause harm and death, especially among elderly people and patients with existing respiratory and cardiac problems.

Three such deaths have occurred in Turkey during previous demonstrations. The *Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare*, known also as the Geneva Protocol, was the first treaty prohibiting the use of chemical and biological weapons.² This was signed in 1925 and came into force in 1928. The Geneva Convention in 1969 further expanded the understanding and definition of the use of tear gas, but some countries, including Turkey, interpret the protocol as excluding tear gases and defoliants. The European Committee on the Prevention of Torture defines tear gas as dangerous and emphasises that excessive use, and use in closed spaces, should be discouraged.³

Tear gas can be used in the form of hand grenades, sprays, and cartridges shot from a gun. Operating instructions on the cartridges clearly state that they should not be aimed at people, to prevent direct trauma. However, 10 demonstrators have lost eyes because police shot cartridges at them at point blank range. One demonstrator underwent orchidectomy, and many lacerations and other minor injuries were caused by cartridges as police used them as gunshot.

The current excessive use of tear gas in Turkey has led to a new treatment to palliate skin, eye, and throat symptoms—a spray of diluted antacid. Although evidence is lacking, demonstrators said that it was helpful to alleviate the effects of the tear gas if applied quickly. Previously, the most common form of protection from tear gas attacks was lemon juice applied to the eyes, which was not very effective.

The World Medical Association has called on the Turkish authorities to end immediately the excessive use of force against peaceful protesters and to ensure the right to freedom of expression and assembly. In a letter to the prime minister, the WMA wrote:

“The purpose of this letter relates to the current demonstrations that started peacefully in Gezi Public Park in Taksim Square-İstanbul on 27 May.

“The Turkish Medical Association (TMA) has drawn our attention to alarming violence with excessive force used against protestors. TMA reports hundreds of cases of injury and detention following police confrontations with protestors in Ankara as well as in other provinces including Adana, Eskişehir, and Gaziantep. According to our sources, the majority of the injuries were caused by the use of water cannon and tear gas.

“The WMA condemns strongly crowd control or riot prevention technology—such as tear gas and water cannon—that is misused, including to perpetrate human rights abuses or that is used in a manner out of proportion with the need, or against populations with particular vulnerabilities.”

The TMA has published reports on the harmful effects of tear gas and campaigned to prevent its use to no avail. In addition,

the TMA has prepared a questionnaire for people affected to evaluate the health effects of tear gas, and 7000 have responded so far (www.ttb.org.tr/images/stories/file/gazrapor.pdf). There is a need for a larger campaign to raise public awareness. And Turkey is in need of more democracy and freedom, without tear gas and police violence.

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- 1 Hurley R. Turkish doctors accuse police of deliberately injuring protesters. *BMJ* 2013;346:f3674.
- 2 United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs. *1925 Geneva Protocol: Protocol for the prohibition of the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of bacteriological methods of warfare*. www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Bio/1925GenevaProtocol.shtml.
- 3 Morgan R, Evans M. *Combating torture in Europe: The work and standards of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture*. Council of Europe, 2002.

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