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U.S. Chemicals For Poison Gas Bought by Iraq

Iraq is preparing to use poison gas again if the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini renews his "human wave" assaults by young Iranians, according to secret intelligence reports received at the State Department.

An agonizing question, meanwhile, hangs over Iraq's gruesome gas bombs: were they made with U.S. chemicals? If not, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

Not long ago, the FBI tracked down a huge shipment of deadly chemicals within hours of its intended flight to Iraq from New York's Kennedy International Airport.

There is disturbing evidence, in fact, that Iraq has been purchasing some of the wherewithal for its chemical warfare on the open U.S. market all along. In 1982, for example, Iraq bought 55 pounds of phosphorous oxychloride and trichloride from U.S. chemical companies.

Dr. Joseph Epstein, a retired chemical warfare expert, told my associate Lucette Lagnado that these compounds can be used to produce a deadly form of nerve gas.

It's impossible to say how many

other purchases of poison gas ingredients Baghdad has made in the United States, since there were no legal restrictions on such sales. Export licenses weren't even required.

This changed after the incident at Kennedy Airport. U.S. intelligence agencies got reliable reports that Iraq was buying a large quantity of potassium fluoride, another compound that can be used to make nerve gas.

What made U.S. officials suspicious was that the shipment, an incredible 6.5 tons, was to be rushed to Iraq by air. This is an unusually high priority for the transport of chemicals. The order had been placed by Iraq's "Ministry of Pesticides," an agency the State Department didn't think existed.

On March 2, the FBI informed the Customs Service that the shipment was either at Kennedy Airport or on its way there. Customs agents checked and found 74 drums of potassium fluoride sitting in a KLM cargo area, addressed to the "Ministry of Pesticides" in Baghdad. The drums were scheduled to be shipped to Iraq via Europe in a matter of hours.

Customs officials embargoed the shipment. After that close call, Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige banned five poison-gas ingredients from sale to Iraq and Iran.

The Reagan administration, despite its secret decision to "tilt" to-

ward Iraq in the Persian Gulf war, also denounced the Iraqis for using poison gas against Iran's fanatical "soldiers of Islam." The Iraqis denied using poison gas, a class of weapons that has been outlawed by treaty and mutual dread since World War I.

But I warned as early as November, 1980, that the Iraqis had developed a chemical warfare capability with Soviet help. I pointed out that the Iraqis were mismatched in manpower and resources and might have to rely on some super-weapon to overcome Iran's numerical superiority. Poison gas would be the logical, if indefensible, recourse, I wrote.

A modest suggestion: the United Nations, which condemned the use of chemical weapons in the Persian Gulf war, not only should name Iraq as the culprit but also should identify the nations that provided Iraq with the know-how and the companies that sold Iraq the ingredients.

Behind the Scenes: Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) was an unsung conciliator in the Democratic leadership's effort to bring Walter F. Mondale and Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.) together. Alarmed by reports from Democratic money men that continued discord could make the race against President Reagan a lost cause and could discourage big contributors, Kennedy persuaded the two rivals to lay down the hatchet, if not bury it.