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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

NOVEMBER 30, 2018

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02.12.2018

## Terror at the Border: Experts Condemn the Tear-Gassing of Children



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On Sunday, US border officers fired tear gas at groups of asylum seekers attempting to reach the US border. Images of mothers and small children fleeing the gas drew widespread outrage from politicians and human rights groups.

Wind carried the gas a kilometer away, impacting many individuals not attempting to reach the US border.

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As a result of the tear gas, one woman collapsed unconscious, a baby fainted, with many others were screaming and coughing, and a child with Down syndrome was among those affected by the gas.

“I felt that my face was burning,” said Cindy Milla, a Honduran woman. “I ran for my life and that of my children.”

But on Tuesday, President Trump defended the use of tear gas, claiming the tear gas used was “very safe”.

Experts contacted by the author strongly disputed Trump’s assurances and called the tear-gassing of children illegal and potentially deadly.

“Tear gas should never, in my opinion, be used on children,” said Dr. Alastair Hay, Professor of Environmental Toxicology at the University of Leeds. “The stinging of the eyes and coughing fits that the tear gases cause will terrify any child.”

If a child with asthma comes into contact with tear gas, it could provoke a dangerous asthma attack in a vulnerable population that may not have access to medicine.

Dr. Rohini Haar, Visiting Professor at UC Berkeley School of Public Health, agreed that exposing children to tear gas was dangerous.

“Children are particularly vulnerable to weapons like these—they have more naive respiratory systems, more fragile skin, perhaps don’t know to close their eyes and mouths so they get more in, and they don’t know quite how to get the stuff off as well as adults.”

Dr. Anna Feigenbaum, who has written a book on the history of tear gas, said, “The safety of tear gas was determined by its exposure to fit, male bodies. Tear gas can be far more dangerous for children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing conditions.”

Tear gas is a toxin, which is lethal if an individual receives a high enough dose, and the lethal dose for children is much lower, according to Dr. Feigenbaum.

“It’s a chemical weapon, not a condiment,” Dr. Feigenbaum said.

“Poisoning the air that children breath puts their lives at risk.”

Tear gases work by compelling people to flee in a panic, which can cause children to be separated from parents, trampled, or trigger an asthma attack.

A percentage of people exposed to tear gas will have long-term impacts, according to Dr. Wright, a professor at Leeds Beckett University. Studies have even linked tear gas to miscarriages.

Both Dr. Feigenbaum and Dr. Haar questioned the legality of using tear gas on children, and Mexico is calling for an investigation into the incident.

“This is a violation of UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force,” said Dr. Feigenbaum.

Dr. Haar said, “Both the US military and police all use standards of conduct that require the use of proportionate force. I can’t imagine how tear-gassing unarmed civilians is proportionate.”

There is also concern that officers using tear gas do so improperly.

“A major hazard for civilians targeted with these weapons is direct injuries to the skull when the projectiles are fired at heads at close range – in contravention of company technical guidance,” said Dr. Wright.

Tear gas is banned for use in war by chemical weapons conventions, but is regularly used against civilians, with especially brutal results by authoritarian regimes.

In 2013, thirty-nine prisoners in Egypt suffocated to death when tear gas was fired into a prison van. In 2011, Saudi Arabia helped the small country of Bahrain crush its Arab Spring uprising, and the security forces extreme use of tear gas killed at least thirty people.

Dr. Feigenbaum criticized the idea that tear gas is truly non-lethal weapon. “Why do we have so many deaths, if these are non-lethal weapons?”

Dr. Wright said the goal of tear gas use is to appear to be less dangerous, but not necessarily be less dangerous.

“In terms of alleged safety, it should be recalled that some of the first WWI agents were so called tear gases,” Dr. Wright said.

In the US alone, there have been over 100 people killed by tear gas, with most of these deaths occurring in prisons or in SWAT raids, according to Dr. Feigenbaum.

Now tear gas has been turned on vulnerable families living in desperate conditions near the US border.

At least some of the tear gas used on Sunday appeared to be Triple Chaser and Saf-Smoke Grenade, based on canisters found near the border.

Triple Chaser and Saf-Smoke Grenade are both manufactured by Defense Technology, a subsidiary of The Safariland Group. Defense Technology’s website includes a warning to potential purchasers of both Triple Chaser and Saf-Smoke Grenade:

“This product can expose you to chemicals including Lead Salts and Hexavalent Chromium, which are known to the State of California to cause cancer, and Lead Salts, which are known to the State of California to cause birth defects or other reproductive harm.”

Dr. Feigenbaum said Triple Chaser is a particularly dangerous form of tear gas because the canister splits into 3 parts, making it hard to control where it will land.

Recently the Trump administration gave US troops at the border have permission to use force to protect border officers, and attempted to take away the right to claim asylum by those who entered the US without authorization.

“In the longer term, we are likely to see much greater use of such weapons at borders as conflict and climate induced migration increase,” said Dr. Wright.

Dr. Anna Feigenbaum summed up one reason she thinks we may be seeing border officers using tear gas at the border.

“Tear gas is cost effective if you don’t have the resources to built permanent infrastructure. You can use tear gas to create a temporary border wall as a solution to the border crisis.”