

Buried past continues to kill

Editor's note: Fifty-eight years ago today, the Japanese emperor, via radio broadcast, ordered all Japanese armed forces to lay down their weapons and surrender to the allies. With Japan's capitulation, World War II ended. However, over half a century later, the chemical weapons abandoned by the Japanese armed forces in China during the war are still injuring civilians.

In the following articles, China Daily reporters **OU SHUYI** and **YU NAN** explore how the abandoned chemical weapons are affecting the lives of Chinese people.

Leakage from mustard gas injures 39

Li Huan, only 4, cries and clamours for his parents every day in the nursery because he hasn't seen them since last Monday.

The little boy doesn't know his father, Li Guizhen, is close to death, suffering from the decline of white blood cells, subdued blood production capability of bone marrow and difficulty in breathing. Li Guizhen's wife desperately watches over him in the hospital day and night hoping a miracle could happen.

Li Guizhen, 31, is one of 39 people who have been hospitalized ailing from the leakage of mustard gas barrels on August 4, which were left over by invading Japanese forces in World War II in Qiqihar, a city in Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province.

Li has been in critical condition for several days while the other 38 victims have not been in as much danger so far, but eight of them are in serious condition, according to the No 203 Hospital of the People's Liberation Army in the city.

Among the victims, the oldest is 53, the youngest only 8. There are altogether five children, according to reports from China Youth Daily.

The chemical weapons, stored in five metal barrels, were discovered in the morning of August 4 at a construction site named Beijing Garden residential community in Qiqihar. One of the barrels was carelessly broken by workers at the site, causing an oil-like substance to leak out and saturate the soil.

Unaware of the nature of the material, Li Guizhen, a waste collector from Central China's Henan Province, bought the barrels with 200 yuan (US\$24.27) and carried them to a recycling station in a residential community. He tried to melt them down and sell them off.

He married Liu Aiping from his hometown two years later and they rent a 40-square-metre room in the suburb of Qiqihar. The couple has been living on earnings from waste-collection.

Li Aimin said the brothers left their aged parents in Henan and came to Qiqihar for making more money since their hometown was in poverty.

"My brother once told me that it would be the last year for us to be here, because he wanted to go back home and run a small business with his limited savings while taking care of our parents," Li Aimin, 27, said with tears in his eyes.

"My parents haven't got the bad news and I don't know how to tell them."

Two people, Wang Cheng and Niu Haiying, who helped Li Guizhen to cut and carry the barrels were both hospitalized, but fortunately their conditions have turned stable.

The number of tainted sites kept expanding and things were getting worse when the polluted soil from the building site was moved to other locations.

Gao Ming, the youngest victim, felt blistered after she played barefoot beside a small pile of soil. The earth was moved from Beijing Garden to fill up the ground depressions of the courtyard where Gao lives to avoid the accumulation of rain water on August 4.

Eight people from five families, including three children, who helped to fill up the depressions or walked on the tainted earth felt pain in their eyes and feet and could not stop vomiting at night. They were immediately hospitalized the next morning when the earth proved to be tainted after testing.

"The cries of my daughter caused by the pains were breaking my heart," said Chen Shuxia, mother of Gao Ming. "Now she is getting better. She can endure the pains during the



Rusty but lethal: Mustard gas leaked from four of the five metal barrels have injured 37 people in Qiqihar, Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province.



ment: Gai Zunxu, 12, gets ground of the mustard gas from last week. He got some of the tainted soil from the chemicals left by the Japanese during the war.

Years of pain culminate in court

Before the gas leak that occurred in Qiqihar last week, an increasing number of Chinese victims of afflictions from abandoned chemical weapons had already been trying to seek financial restitution from Japan.

One of the first lawsuits was brought by five Chinese plaintiffs from Heilongjiang Province to the Tokyo District Court in October 1997, demanding a total of 80 million yen (US\$685,000) in damages.

In May this year, the Tokyo District Court rejected their demands for both an apology and compensation. The ruling was the first legal judgment delivered by a court in Japan concerning injuries caused by chemical weapons left behind by the Japanese military after World War II.

The plaintiffs were afflicted with a variety of ailments caused by the abandoned chemical weapons in Heilongjiang between 1950 and 1987 still suffered from ulcers and bronchial problems for years, and have lived in constant fear of developing cancer.

One of them was 86-year-old Cui Yingxun, once a chemistry teacher in Qiqihar, who would never forget the day he was poisoned in 1950. Only in 1997, he came to Japan to sue the Japanese government.

Later he was sent to hospital with blisters up to his elbows. He spent months battling infections in the hospital.

One construction worker died in agony after mistaking the liquid for rice wine and gulping down a ladleful, Cui recalled.

Cui has survived. But the memory and the symptoms linger to this day. He has spent a lifetime enduring chronic headaches and insomnia.

A similar suit was filed in December 1996 by 13 Chinese, whose relatives were killed or who were injured by dumped chemical weapons in the Songhua River in Northeast China's Jilin Province. They are demanding 20 million yen (US\$169,000) each in damages. The Tokyo court

is to hand down its ruling on September 27.

Li Chen, 59, was one of the 13 plaintiffs.

On October 20, 1974, Li and his colleagues were working on a tugboat, pumping silt from the Songhua River around a port. Suddenly the pump became blocked. When they inspected the suction pipe, they found a discarded bomb clustered in the pipe.

Later they laid out the bomb on the floor of the engine room. None of them realized they were dealing with a deadly mustard-lewisite bomb. Yellow gas seeped out and a sticky liquid oozed onto the floor. Thirty-seven workers became infected and Li was one of the most severely injured. Two hours later, his hands swelled up and he was unable to see.

He had been hospitalized for over six months. He was incapacitated from working by the accident — his eyesight has worsened drastically and there are web-like scars on both hands.

As a lawyer for the Chinese plaintiffs in these two actions, Su Xiangxiang, 34, had kept a cautious attitude towards the verdict of the cases.

"No matter what the result would be, the point is people will no longer cast doubt about or ignore the sufferings the Chinese victims have endured," Su said. "The Japanese government has demanded compensation. But details about the demands are not available."

Su arrived in Qiqihar on August 5 and started to work on the compensation of the case.

"The victims have the right to demand that the Japanese Government to apologize and compensate them," Su said.

If they cannot get compensation through negotiations between Chinese and Japanese governments, the victims will very likely file a lawsuit against the Japanese Government, Su added.

"We should push the Japanese Government to clear up and destroy any abandoned chemical weapons as soon as possible," Su said.

Experts believed the passage of time has only made the abandoned chemical weapons more dangerous and life-threatening.

to Qiqihar 10 years ago from Liji Village, Shangcai County in Henan Province. They have made their livings by collecting waste since then.

ing to sources from the hospital.

All patients are under observation, but it is possible for their conditions to worsen, hospital said.

Japan's weapons remain lethal half a century after WWII

The leaking of mustard gas barrels on August 4 in Qiqihar, in Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province is not an isolated accident, according to Cao Zhibo, the former director of the Qiqihar Academy of Social Sciences, who has been tracking down hard evidence in relation to the Japanese army's use of chemical weapons during World War II.

These discarded weapons have so far been found in more than 30 locations in over 10 cities and provinces and have caused 2,000 casualties and fatalities since 1945, Cao Zhibo says.

Cao especially recalls the three years he spent with Jin Lei, a researcher with the State Seismological Bureau, as part of an arduous investigation into the situation relating to the abandoned Japanese chemical weapons.

In addition to conducting site investigations, they also delved into a variety of documents and analyzed references concerning abandoned projectiles and chemical agents.

"We were shocked at what we had found," Cao recalled.

The former Japanese army started seriously from 1924 on its research into the development of chemical weapons.

In 1931, Japan invaded Northeast China and then established Unit 516 in Qiqihar to test and develop its chemical arsenal.

By the end of 1945, Japanese chemical attacks against the Chinese had resulted in an estimated 80,000 casualties and 10,000 fatalities.

The Japanese army did not use all of its chemical weapons and left many behind during the hurried exodus during the closing months of the war.

Meanwhile, to erase evidence of Japan's actions, which were contrary to the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning the use of chemical weapons during warfare, the Japanese army sought to hide the large amount of unused chemical weapons by burying all of the documents and photos related to the secret research of Unit 516.

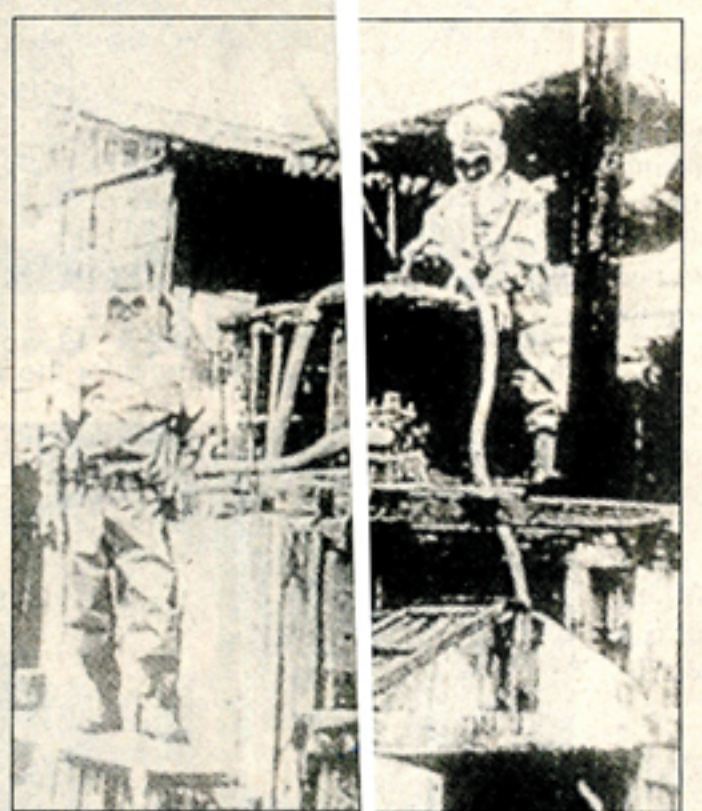
"For a long time, how Unit 516 operated remained a mystery," said Cao, who had been researching Qiqihar's history since the late 1980s.

"Little was known about its output, organizational structure and staffing and the amounts and locations of the chemical weapons buried in China at the end of the war."

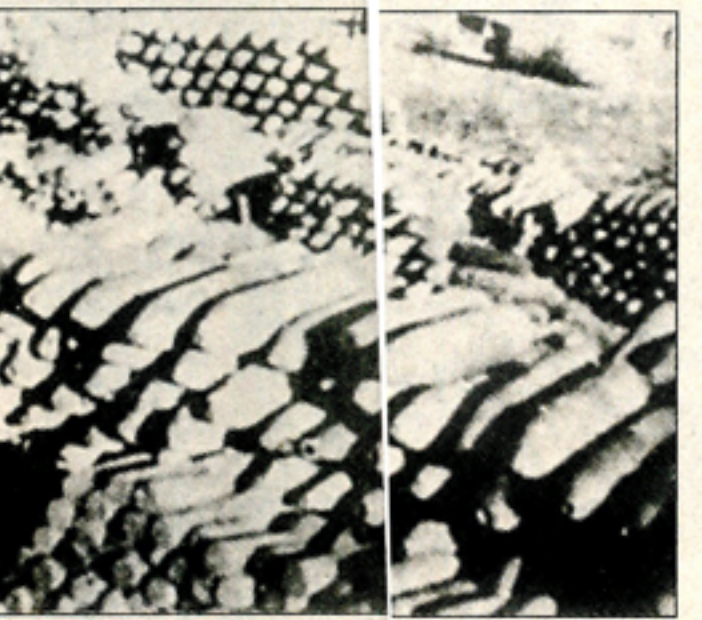
Based on their three-year research, Cao and Jin co-wrote a book — "Japan's Chemical Warfare Riben Huaxuezhuan Shilu" — which was first published by Heilongjiang People's Press in 1998.



Above: Cao Zhibo shows visitors where Unit 516, the Japanese army's research institute on chemical warfare during the World War II, was located in Qiqihar, some three kilometres southeast of today's Qiqihar Railway Station. **Right:** This old picture shows the chemical weapons that were found in the late 1940s in Jiaohua City of Northeast China's Jilin Province. Since 2001, local police in Qiqihar have collected nearly 1,000 parts of bombs, which were left by the Japanese army after their defeat in 1945. Among those, 28 were found to be chemical weapons.



Dangerous work: Two Japanese soldiers operate equipment for extracting mustard gas.



A wide range of the Chinese people have already been affected, including teachers and students who found abandoned chemical weapons on school grounds, riverboat workers who brought the weapons up using dredging operations and construction workers digging beneath city streets.

The effects of exposure to the chemicals have ranged from minor injuries to death.

"The buried past can still kill people in our country," said Cao. "Until all the poisonous weapons have been uncovered and destroyed, people will continue to live under the threat of accidental exposure to chemical weapons."

Public calls for cleanup of war chemicals

The tragedy caused by the leakage of mustard gas in Qiqihar has stirred up bitter historical memories for Chinese people.

Public calls for the immediate location and destruction of the dangerous abandoned chemical weapons are mounting.

Sources with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that so far, Japanese chemical weapons have been discovered in more than 10 Chinese provinces. Unknown amounts of such chemicals were left in China when Japanese troops fled the country at the end of World War II.

Negotiations with Japan concerning the location and destruction of abandoned chemicals intended for warfare began in the mid-1980s.

On July 30, 1999, China and Japan signed a memorandum concerning the destruction of chemical weapons abandoned by Japanese troops in China.

In that memorandum, the Japanese Government promised that their own experts would carry out the work of locating and destroying such chemicals and that the Japanese Government would provide all the necessary equipment and technical and financial support.

In August of 1999, an office in charge of Sino-Japanese co-operation in destroying dangerous abandoned chemical weapons was established. The Chinese members consist of officials and experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Headquarters of General Staff of the PLA and the State Environmental Protection Administration.

"The specific locations and numbers of all the abandoned chemicals remain unclear and it's not easy to locate them," said Ge Guangbiao, the head of the office. "Those are the main reasons why the process has been slow."

Two main factors have complicated the search. One is that geographical conditions have changed, because over a half a century has elapsed since the war ended. The other is



Criminal evidence: An old Japanese army map indicates where and when the Japanese army dropped chemical weapons and bombs between 1938 and 1944.

that most of the chemicals were buried deeply in the earth or sunk in rivers and lakes.

Despite the difficulties, Ge said he and his colleagues have continued the search work since the early 1990s. With the help of the clues they have gathered by interviewing aged Japanese soldiers and remaining documents and records, they have discovered abandoned chemical weapons in more than 10 provinces around the country.

At present, Ge said that the Chinese side is doing its best to save the victims after their exposure to the mustard gas leaked from the canisters abandoned by Japanese troops and to clean up the affected areas.