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Working Paper

INCAPACITATING AGENTS

(Some aspects of definition, classification and toxicological characteristics)

According to the general purpose criterion, incapacitating agents, owing to their physical, chemical and other characteristics, can be used for both military and non-military purposes (better known as a part of dual-purpose agents). According to the degree of toxicity, these compounds should be classified as non-lethal or other harmful chemicals (USSR-USA Joint Report, CD/112, 7 July 1980).

The need to establish the toxicity (not only the lethality) criteria as part of the definition of scope for a chemical weapons convention has been generally agreed in the Committee on Disarmament. For these reasons, the classification of incapacitating agents can be made on the basis of the toxicological manifestations (symptoms) or on the basis of the time of their onset and the duration and disappearance of symptoms after exposure to these substances (Table 1). For the purpose of the future convention on the prohibition of chemical weapons, it seems more acceptable to us to classify incapacitating agents according to the duration of toxic effects into two main categories:

- Short-term incapacitants
- Long-term incapacitants

In the military sense, both categories could be defined as chemical agents which impair the subjects' ability to carry out duties, but the use of which does not incur serious risk or death or permanent injury. Therefore, incapacitating agents produce in normal (healthy) people a temporary, reversible disability with few, if any, permanent effects. However, in young children, old people and those with impaired health, the effect may sometimes be aggravated. They are called incapacitating agents because the ratio between the lethal and incapacitating doses is very high.

SHORT-TERM INCAPACITANTS

Short-term incapacitants may be defined as chemical compounds that are capable of rapidly causing a temporary disablement that lasts a little longer than the period of exposure. They have also been called "harassing agents", "riot agents", etc. They are unlikely to kill or produce long lasting injury, except when used in doses (concentrations) much higher than those necessary to produce disablement. Short-term incapacitants have been extensively employed in wars and by police forces (about 15 sensory irritants have been used at various times in different