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U.S. condemns Iraq's use of poison gas in war with Iran

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WASHINGTON — The State Department Monday accused Iraq of using internationally outlawed "lethal chemical weapons" against Iranian troops in the war between the Persian Gulf neighbors.

Iran has frequently charged Iraq with using poison gas, and recently U.S. officials have suggested that such claims could be true. But Monday marked the first public accusation against Iraq by the Reagan administration, which, although officially neutral on the war, has tended to be more sympathetic toward Iraq.

Citing "available evidence" against Iraq, the State Department said "the United States strongly condemns the prohibited use of chemical weapons wherever it occurs. There can be no justification for their use by any country."

Privately, some officials were less harsh on the Iraqis. They said the country faced a situation in which it was being attacked by waves of Iranian troops and where any major crack in the Iraqi defenses could bring down the army and the government. Thus, they said, it was not surprising that Iraq would use any weapon in its arsenal.

Intelligence sources said the Iraqis are mostly using mustard gas, an incapacitating and sometimes lethal gas that was employed extensively during the First World War. Its use was later banned under the 1925 Geneva Convention, which Iran and Iraq signed.

The sources said Iraq is producing the poison gas in its own facilities and that there are also indications that the Middle East country has begun limited production of a much more lethal nerve gas.

The informants traced Iraq's involvement with chemical weapons to the 1950s, when Baghdad, using equipment provided by the Soviet Union, sought to develop defenses against chemical warfare. But in the early 1970s, the sources said, Iraq began making mustard gas for offensive weapons, accelerating production in the early 1980s after the war began.

U.S. government sources said Monday that Iraq has three plants producing poisonous gas. One, about 100 kilometres northwest of Baghdad, is the main mustard-gas producer, and also appears to house a new nerve-gas production facility that U.S. specialists say could turn out significant amounts within a year.

U.S. specialists said Iraq used mustard gas against Iranian forces in October and November and again much more recently. They said it appears that most of the gas was fired at the Iranians in artillery and mortar shells, and some of it in bombs. There sometimes was confusion about what gas was being used, they said, because Iraq also occasionally used non-lethal tear gas.

Officials here were unwilling to speculate on the possible effect of the State Department statement Monday, although officials said they would support a UN investigation.