Jean Pascal Zanders, owner of The Trench, on needing accuracy in accusations

When the BBC alleged Georgia's misuse of BBC

During the final quarter of 2024, mass demonstrations roiled the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. The leader in the 26 October parliamentary elections, pro-Moscow party Georgian Dream, declared victory prompting claims of electoral fraud and calls for recounts. Protests continued but intensified significantly after the Georgian Dream led government suspended the country's EU accession process on 28 November. A year later, the daily demonstrations are unrelenting.[1] It's reported that the authorities' heavy-handed response includes beatings, arrests, fines and the use of hired thugs, as well as the systematic, liberal use of lachrymatory agents. One such accusation concerns the discharge of camite, a rather obscure irritant of first world war vintage.

Marking the anniversary of the protests, the BBC World Service broadcast a powerful hour-long documentary on Georgia's backsliding into repression reminiscent of the Soviet Union and the resilience of the pro-democracy and pro-European movement. The programme focussed heavily on excessive use of lachrymatory agents against the protestors, including the dispersal of camite via water cannon,[2] and was supported with two articles on the BBC website centring on the claim.[3]

If the allegation of camite deployment as a crowd control tool is accurate, the incident would echo the recent introduction of two other world war one toxicants: chlorine in the Syrian civil war and chloropicrin in the Ukrainian trenches.

What is camite?

Camite is an artillery-delivered irritant introduced by France in July 1918. The US codenamed it CA, and the UK called it BBC,on the basis of its chemical name: bromobenzyl cyanide. A 1918 manual by the American expeditionary forces on chemical defence characterised it as the "most powerful lachrymator known" and highlighted its persistence: up to three days in an open space and seven days in woods.[4] Its lethal index equals that of chlorine, initially used near Ypres, Belgium, in 1915.[5]

The German chemist Carl Ludwig Reimer, who first synthesised the compound in 1880, remarked: "The product is a viscous, faintly reddish liquid with a very unpleasant odour and acrid taste. Even in very small quantities, its vapours cause severe eye pain".[6] The eyes of people exposed to a strong concentration of camite can be washed with a saturated solution of boric acid.[7]

Despite its superiority as an eye-irritant, the US replaced CA with CN (chloracetophenone) because the latter's greater stability made it "much preferable for most uses".[8] Several countries continued to use CA as a riot control agent (RCA) in the 1920s and into the 1930s. In the early 1950s, the British military tested air-dropped camite sticks for military use against communist insurgents in the jungles of British Malaya (which became Malaysia in 1957. Historian Ed.). Limited stockpiles and the end of production may have prevented its launch as a weapon of war[9], with tests on the island of Pulao Tenggol possibly the last time the military actually considered bromobenzyl cyanide as a weapon. Today, the compound has widespread industrial applications as an intermediary in organic synthesis.[10]

Constructing an allegation

In the documentary three threads intertwined. Firstly, the heavy-handed crowd control methods and deployment of intimidating equipment, such as water cannons, in conjunction with irritant agents, exemplified the Georgian government's human rights abuses. The lachrymators make up the second thread. By polluting the air to intolerable levels with irritants, Georgian riot control police forced the protestors to decamp. The government thus denied its citizens their democratic right to protest peacefully, adding to their human rights grievances. The final thread involves the alleged use of camite. Its deployment amounted to a further escalation of the violence. Given its persistence in open spaces, it denied protestors access to the demonstration areas. The irritant's long-lasting clinical effects also incapacitated those affected for days, if not weeks. Furthermore, seeing the agent's consequences raised psychological barriers to future participation in the protests for many government opponents.

Amid the many allegations of human rights abuses, the BBC team evaluated reports of qualitatively different harm attributed to RCAs and water cannon. One of the whistleblowers interviewed spoke of an unknown agent several times more potent than regular lachrymators. Further investigation produced a list of UN codes for harmful chemicals, one of which corresponded to nitriles, and with help from a US toxicologist, the investigators determined that camite had to be the injurious substance.

Issues with the investigation

For an investigation into the alleged use of a chemical weapon (CW), the deductive logic that led to the identification of camite was deeply flawed. The viewer saw an animated graphic rather than a snapshot of the

When the BBC alleged Georgia's misuse of BBC

original document suggesting the Georgian riot control police possess bromobenzyl cyanide and a dissolvent. The BBC website did not reproduce the document either. At no point did the documentary makers indicate that they had collected environmental samples from water cannon discharges, contaminated clothing, or blood, tissue and other patient samples. They did not identify one person who had been exposed to a water jet with dissolved camite, nor did they place any of the RCA victims they interviewed in protest lines facing the water cannons.

What's more, they didn't describe any specific types of harm that could be linked to camite rather than to repeated or prolonged exposure to the common lachrymator CS. They interviewed at length a Georgian paediatrician, Konstantine Chakhunashvili, who surveyed victims to determine patterns of long-lasting RCA traumas, but, inexplicably, did not reveal that his research and scientific paper addressed CS.[11] Interviewed the day after the BBC documentary aired, he indicated that he was unaware of any possible use of camite.[12]

The BBC team's inquiry, however, was about human rights abuses. By homing in on the escalating use of RCAs, it sought to show how far the Georgian authorities are willing to go to suppress the pro-democracy movement. Since the spring of 2024, it involved the repeated use of lachrymators CS and oleoresin capsicum, water cannons and rubber bullets, among other things. The inordinate spraying of chemical irritants by water cannon and the growing number of hospital visits by affected protestors led medical professionals to petition the government to disclose the specific substances. They were anticipating long-term health complications.[13] So, even if the particular claim about the irritant agent were to be disproved, from a human rights perspective it would not affect the consensus that the government's response to the protests is excessive.

Discussion

The BBC documentary alleged the extensive use of a harmful RCA. Naming a relatively obscure world war one irritant more potent than agents currently in use elevates this allegation. Whistleblower testimonies and a Georgian riot control police weapons inventory make it hard to simply dismiss the charge.

The supporting evidence is circumstantial at best, but may suffice if the goal is to mobilise national and international opinion against an increasingly authoritarian, pro-Moscow government. But its construction leaves ample space for the government and its supporters to deny the allegation and launch a disinformation blitz, which they did. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze admitted that a substance was present in the water cannons during a press briefing on 3 December 2025. He also confirmed the inventory's authenticity. Just three days later, the Georgia's state security service denied ever having purchased camite, while confirming the use of the common lachrymator CS.[14] The latter admission can hardly have pleased the human rights investigators: after all, the combination of CS and water cannon is not that uncommon in riot control operations.

The episode clearly points to the need for more integrated multidisciplinary collaboration between humanitarian organisations and chemical weapons experts in investigations of alleged CW use, even for riot control purposes. That way the accusation will have more substance, while those trying to cast a fog over the misuse of toxic substances will have narrower opportunities for denial and disinformation.

Heavy-handed crowd control methods does not guarantee specific RCA use
©AI Generated for Illustrative Purposes

[1] https://apnews.com/article/georgia-protests-european-union-crackdown-ad554712ea4a1a04e0f9b62c78d6c0e5.
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4-koO916Gk.
[3] https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czrk7g50e1po. https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2025/bbc-eye-when-water-burns.
[4] American Expeditionary Forces, Defense Against Gas. A E F No. 1433 G-5 (December 1918), Summary of markings for chemical shell and properties of commonest gases, 76.
[5] Prentiss, A. M., Chemicals in War: A Treatise on Chemical Warfare. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1937), Relative toxicity from inhalation (After Haber), 14.
[6] Reimer, C. L. (1881). 'Ueber die Einwirkung von Brom auf Benzylcyanid. Zweite Mittheilung'. (On the effect of bromine on benzyl cyanide. Second communication.) Berichte der deutschen chemischen Gesellschaft (14:2), 1779.
[7] Medical Research Division, Edgewood Arsenal (1926). 'Chemical warfare agents and first aid treatment'. Chemical Warfare (12:11), 11.
[8] .Ibid, 10.
[9] Perry Robinson, J. P. (1994). 'The former test and evaluation site on Pulao Tenggol'. Chemical Weapons Convention Bulletin, Issue 25, 6.
[10] https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/compound/Bromobenzyl-Cyanide.
[11] Chakhunashvili, K., Gunashvili, G., Jobava, N., Chakhunashvili, G., and Chakhunashvili, D. G. (2025). 'Collateral damage: Cardiovascular and respiratory implications of tear gas deployment during peaceful protest.' Toxicology Reports (15), 1-10.
[12] https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/articles-in-english/597230/.
[13] Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, Human Rights Crisis in Georgia Following the 2024 Parliamentary Elections (Tbilisi, 2025), 38-40.
[14] https://civil.ge/archives/713482. https://civil.ge/archives/713733.