

The workers got it on their hands and clothing every day while racing for 2 1/2 months to meet a deadline to get the plant, a crucial part of Iraq's oil infrastructure, up and running.

But the chemical turned out to be sodium dichromate, a substance so dangerous that even limited exposure greatly increases the risk of cancer. Soon, many of the 22 Americans and 100-plus Iraqis began to complain of nosebleeds, ulcers, and shortness of breath. Within weeks, nearly 60 percent exhibited symptoms of exposure, according to the minutes of a meeting of project managers from KBR, the Houston-based construction company in charge of the repairs.

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