

## **Syria invites chemical weapons inspectors**

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A senior Russian lawmaker says Moscow is willing to help arrange a visit this week for experts from the international chemical weapons watchdog to the site of a suspected poison gas attack in Syria.

**The opposition blamed President Bashar Assad's forces, accusations the government strongly denies. (Source: AP)**

**Beirut:** Syria says it has invited the international chemical weapons watchdog to send a fact-finding mission into the country to investigate a suspected poison gas attack near Damascus over the weekend. The Foreign Ministry said Syria will help the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to investigate the alleged attack, which opposition activists say killed 40 people over the weekend.

The Syrian government denied it carried out a poison gas attack in Douma, the last rebel-held town in the eastern Ghouta suburbs. Washington has threatened to take military action against Syria to punish it for the alleged attack. Syria called on the OPCW on Tuesday to work with "full transparency and rely on credible and tangible evidence." German Chancellor Angela Merkel has responded unenthusiastically to a Russian proposal that experts from the international chemical weapons watchdog visit the site of a suspected poison gas attack in Syria.

A senior Russian lawmaker said earlier Tuesday that Moscow is willing to help arrange a visit. Asked in Berlin on Tuesday whether she supports the idea, Merkel replied that "the evidence that chemical weapons were used there is very, very clear." She added: "As far as I am concerned, that can be checked over again, but it doesn't help us as we condemn the case." Merkel said that "we must speak very, very clearly."

Syrian opposition activists say 40 people died in Saturday's chemical attack in Douma. The opposition blamed President Bashar Assad's forces, accusations the government strongly denies. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says he is outraged by Syria's apparent chemical weapons use against civilians. Guterres says in a statement Tuesday that if confirmed, the use of such weapons would be a violation of international law.

Opposition activists said 40 people died in Saturday night's apparent chemical attack in the town of Douma, the last remaining rebel bastion in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. Guterres says he reaffirms his support of an investigation into the alleged attack by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says his country will hand over control of the strategic town of Afrin \_ which Turkish troops seized from Syrian Kurdish forces last month \_ to the people of Afrin "when the time is right."

His comments, reported by the state-run Anadolu Agency on Tuesday, were in response to Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who said Monday that Russia expects Turkey to bring Afrin under the control of the Syrian government. Erdogan was quoted as saying: "We will determine the time. That is up to us, not to Mr. Lavrov."

In an address to party legislators earlier, Erdogan again condemned the weekend's suspected poison gas attack in Syria and called for the perpetrators to "pay a heavy price for it." Erdogan said he would continue to hold discussions with Russia's president Vladimir Putin over the suspected chemical attack. The foreign ministers of Germany and Sweden are calling on Russia to use its influence in Syria to pressure President Bashar Assad's government to give up its chemical weapons in the wake of a suspected poison gas attack.

Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom dismissed the idea of military retaliation Tuesday, saying "it's the role of the Security Council first of all to advocate a non-violent resolution to this" to avoid escalation. Calling the attack a "horrible crime," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Russia and others needed to ensure Assad gives up chemical weapons and opens humanitarian air corridors.

Wallstrom added "these are civilians who have once more been attacked and killed in this way \_ this is simply unacceptable and we need to keep up the pressure on Russia." A senior Iranian official says Israel's airstrike on a Syrian air base that killed seven Iranians "will not go unanswered." Ali Akbar Velayati, an aide to Iran's supreme leader, made his comments upon arrival in the Syrian capital on Tuesday.

Iran is one of President Bashar Assad's strongest backers and has sent thousands of Iran-backed gunmen to back his forces. Velayati was quoted by the country's state-run news agency IRNA. Russia, Iran and Syria have blamed Israel for Monday's attack on the T4 air base in the central province of Homs that a Syria war monitor said killed 14 people, including Iranians. Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency puts the number of Iranians killed in a missile attack on a Syrian air base at seven.

Israel's official Holocaust memorial says that Syria's latest suspected chemical weapons attack shows that international organizations set up after the Holocaust have failed in their job. Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev says Tuesday that the images of citizens, including children, being massacred just beyond Israel's border reveal crimes against humanity that the world must step in to stop. He said they were allowed to take place because of the "world's indifference." He called on international bodies to act decisively to end the suffering.

Syrian opposition activists say 40 people died in Saturday night's poison gas attack in the town of Douma, the last remaining rebel bastion near Damascus. Israel was established on the heels of the Nazi genocide that killed 6 million Jews, wiping out a third of world Jewry. Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency puts the number of Iranians killed in a missile attack on a Syrian air base at seven.

The Tuesday report said bodies of victims have been transferred to Tehran. It said funerals will be held in the victims' cities of origin across the country. Two of them, Hamed Rezai and Hojjatollah Nochamani, are from Tehran. The report did not provide the victims' military rank or further information. On Monday, Iran identified four of the killed, including a Revolutionary Guard colonel.

Russia and the Syrian military blamed Monday's pre-dawn strike, which reportedly killed 14 people, on Israel. Iran is a key ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad and has sent troops to bolster his forces in an advisory role, but hundreds have been killed so far. Israel is strongly condemning the Syrian government's suspected chemical weapons attack on its own citizens. Israel's foreign ministry says Tuesday that Syria "continues to perpetrate crimes against humanity in using these outlawed weapons."

Syrian opposition activists say 40 people died in Saturday night's poison gas attack in the town of Douma, the last remaining rebel bastion near Damascus. Israel says the attack "joins a long series of similar attacks using chemical weapons" by the Assad regime after it undertook to disarm from such weapons. Both Russia and Syria have blamed Israel for an airstrike Monday on a military air base in central Syria that reportedly killed at least 14 people, including Iranians active in Syria.

Israel has vowed not to allow an Iranian foothold on its doorstep. A top Russian diplomat says the Israeli ambassador in Moscow has been "invited" to the Foreign Ministry to discuss developments in Syria following an airstrike that both Moscow and Damascus have blamed on Israel. The Russian military said the Israeli Air Force launched Monday's airstrike on a military air base in central Syria that reportedly killed at least 14 people, including Iranians active in Syria.

Israel did not comment on the airstrike. Mikhail Bogdanov, Russian presidential envoy for the Middle East and Africa, told Russian news agencies on Tuesday that the Israeli ambassador to Moscow was asked to come to the Foreign Ministry "to talk" later in the day. Asked if it was about the airstrike, Bogdanov only said Russian diplomats want to talk about various issues related to the Syrian war, as well as bilateral relations.

Syrian war monitors say government forces and their allies are on alert and taking precautionary measures at military bases and posts across the country amid fears of a military attack by the United States. The measures come as President Donald Trump is threatening an imminent military strike against Syria, vowing to respond "forcefully" to Saturday's apparent chemical weapons attack on civilians and warning that Russia or any other nation found to share responsibility will "pay a price."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says that as of Monday night, troops have been on a 72-hour alert and are fortifying their positions. The Sound and Picture Organization, an activist collective in eastern Syria, said on Tuesday that Iranian fighters and members of Lebanon's Hezbollah group have evacuated their positions in the Boukamal area, near Iraq's border.

A senior Russian lawmaker says Moscow is willing to help arrange a visit this week for experts from the international chemical weapons watchdog to the site of a suspected poison gas attack in Syria. Syrian opposition activists say 40 people died in Saturday night's chemical attack in the town of Douma, the last remaining rebel bastion near Damascus. The opposition blamed President Bashar Assad's forces for the attack, accusations the government strongly denies.

Yevgeny Serberennikov, from the defense committee at the Federation Council, told the RIA Novosti news agency on Tuesday that Russia is anxious for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to "finally start carrying out the functions it was created for." Russia's offer comes as President Donald Trump is threatening an imminent military strike against Syria.

- AP