

UN Security Council heads to retreat at odds over Syria

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United Nations: The UN Security Council is heading to a remote Swedish estate this weekend for its annual retreat with the secretary-general after one of its most contentious weeks in years that saw ambassadors accusing each other of lying about a suspected chemical attack in Syria.

Sweden’s deputy UN ambassador, Carl Skau, whose country is serving a two-year term on the council and is hosting the retreat, told reporters Wednesday that the meeting is taking place “at a critical time for the United Nations but also at a very difficult moment for the life of the Security Council.”

The UN’s most powerful body has been paralyzed in dealing with the seven-year Syrian conflict, and the six council meetings since the suspected poison gas attack in the Damascus suburb of Douma on April 7 have again put an almost daily spotlight on its deep divisions.

The United States, France and Britain blamed Syrian President Bashar Assad for the attack that reportedly killed at least 40 people, and they conducted airstrikes Friday on Syrian chemical sites. Russia and close ally Syria vehemently deny any involvement, while Russia accuses the Western allies of trying to tarnish its global image.

The retreat is coming on the heels of “one of our probably most divisive weeks in the council,” Skau said.

But he expressed hope the 15 council ambassadors will be able to put aside their differences during the gathering at the newly renovated private estate of former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swede who was killed in a mysterious 1961 plane crash on a peace mission to Congo.

“The nature of conflicts are changing or shifting, and the drivers of conflicts are changing,” Skau said. “So it’s important council members and the secretary-general have this time to step back to reflect on how to respond to these immense challenges _ but also, of course, on how to prevent further crises to erupt.”

He hopes that Hammarskjöld’s legacy and the relaxed atmosphere at his estate in southern Sweden, called Backakra, will inspire council ambassadors during meetings with Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to find a way forward in Syria.

It’s also important that divisions over Syria don’t negatively influence discussions on other urgent global issues, Skau said.

Russia’s UN ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, was asked whether the retreat would be awkward because he would be spending lots of time with the US, British and French ambassadors.

“I will see how they feel about dealing with me after all what happened,” he said.

Asked if the retreat might improve her relations with Nebenzia, British Ambassador Karen Pierce replied, "I would like to think that the United Kingdom is a good partner for everyone on the Security Council, including Russia."

"But we will push back on malign behavior wherever we find it," she quickly added.

Nonetheless, she said Britain wants to work with Russia and Nebenzia to try to make progress on getting back to a political process that can lead to peace in Syria.

"That's the most important thing," Pierce said. "So I do hope that the retreat will be able to make progress on that. We will be trying very hard."

- AP