

Israeli Intelligence: Assad Gassed Syrian Civilians

Israeli intelligence officials believe Syria used chemical weapons on civilians on Wednesday, and not for the first time, Minister of International Relations, Intelligence and Strategic Affairs Yuval Steinitz (Likud) told Israel Radio on Thursday, commenting on the reported deadly attack unleashed by Syrian President Bashar Assad on civilians on the outskirts of Damascus.

The Syrian opposition says what is believed to have been a sarin gas attack killed over 1,300 people. Assad's government denies using chemical weapons.

Steinitz further called the international condemnation of the attack "lip service," saying the international community "has failed to take any significant action to stop Assad from butchering his people."

"The U.N. is still busy investigating things that happened six months or a year ago, instead of investigating what happened yesterday," he says. "Moreover, investigating whether chemical weapons were used without looking into who used them is ridiculous."

Defense Minister Moshe "Bogie" Ya'alon and U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel discussed the situation in Syria on Wednesday, Army Radio reports, quoting defense officials as saying Israel was concerned about the U.S.' "flexible red line" regarding Assad's use of chemical weapons and how it may affect regional deterrence and other conflicts, such as the Iranian nuclear threat.

Wednesday's attack came exactly one year after U.S. President Barack Obama warned Assad against using unconventional weapons on the civilian population, saying it represented a "red line"

for the United States that would mandate action.

“The Assad regime has already used chemical weapons several times. The death toll in Syria has now crossed the 100,000 mark. This is a struggle for life and death, and there is no end in sight,” Ya’alon told reporters Wednesday.

Ya’alon further added that 60 percent of Syria is no longer under Assad’s control but is instead ruled by various opposition groups. The defense minister said the use of chemical weapons indicates just how desperate the Syrian president has become.

“Everything is still only happening around us, and it hasn’t reached us yet, but Israel knows that reality can change within moments, not just by a terror attack on one of the borders but as a result of strategic political shifts in the region,” he said.

Member of the Knesset Binyamin Ben-Eliezer (Labor) told Israel Radio, “Assad is guilty of genocide and the world—which is so quick to denounce us over every little thing—stands idly by, doing nothing.”

Ben-Eliezer said that Obama’s “red line” has been crossed and that Israel must remain vigilant and prevent any unconventional weapons from reaching Hezbollah, al-Qaida or other terror groups.

Russia, China Block UN Probe in Syria

The U.N. Security Council held a two-hour emergency session Wednesday following the deadly attack near Damascus, but longtime Syria allies Russia and China prevented the 15-member forum from launching an official investigation into the incident.

The Security Council called for “a thorough, impartial and prompt investigation” of the latest allegation of chemical

weapons use in Syria but did not set a timetable for one. The United States, Britain and France are among 35 countries that urged chief U.N. investigator Åke Sellström and his team in Syria to investigate the incident without delay.

“There is a strong concern among council members about the allegations and a general sense that there must be clarity on what happened and the situation must be followed closely,” Argentina’s U.N. ambassador, María Cristina Perceval, said after the meeting.

While the council did not explicitly call for a U.N. investigation, it welcomed U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s call for one.

“The members of the Security Council also welcomed the determination of the secretary-general to ensure a thorough, impartial and prompt investigation,” said Perceval, who serves as president of the council this month.

Washington expressed its concern over the growing death toll in Syria.

“The United States is deeply concerned by reports that hundreds of Syrian civilians have been killed in an attack by Syrian government forces, including by the use of chemical weapons, near Damascus,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Wednesday.

“We are formally requesting that the United Nations urgently investigate this new allegation. The U.N. investigative team, which is currently in Syria, is prepared to do so, and that is consistent with its purpose and mandate,” he said, adding that “if the Syrian government has nothing to hide,” it would facilitate the work of the U.N. inspectors.

“They must have immediate access to witnesses and affected individuals and have the ability to examine and collect physical evidence without any interference or manipulation

from the Syrian government,” Earnest said.

U.N. diplomats said Wednesday that Russia and China used their clout in the Security Council to block any real action against their Middle East ally, over what they perceived as “overly harsh language” against Syria.

An earlier Western-drafted statement, seen by Reuters, would have asked the U.N. to “urgently take the steps necessary for today’s attack to be investigated by the U.N. mission.” That proposed statement was diluted to accommodate Russian and Chinese objections, eventually sufficing with a demand for “more clarity” on the incident prior to any investigation, council diplomats said.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry called for a thorough investigation into the reports of the attack. Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said that its sources in Syria said that a homemade rocket carrying unidentified chemical substances had been launched from an area controlled by the opposition.

“All this cannot but suggest that once again we are dealing with a pre-planned provocation. This is supported by the fact that the criminal act was committed near Damascus at the very moment when a mission of U.N. experts had successfully started their work of investigating allegations of the possible use of chemical weapons there,” Lukashevich said in a statement.

“Moscow considers important an objective and professional investigation into what happened. And we call on all those who have the possibility to influence armed extremists to make every effort to end provocations with chemical agents,” he said.

World Leaders Demand Investigation

European Union Foreign Affairs Commissioner Catherine Ashton called for an immediate investigation of the attack, saying, “I have seen with grave concern the reports of the possible

use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. Such accusations should be immediately and thoroughly investigated by the United Nations expert mission, which arrived recently in Syria. I reiterate that any use of chemical weapons by any side in Syria would be totally unacceptable," she stressed.

Ashton urged full cooperation by Syrian authorities in the investigation, saying the U.N. mission "must be allowed full and unhindered access to all sites on the Syrian territory."

"I am deeply concerned by reports that hundreds of people, including children, have been killed in airstrikes and a chemical weapons attack on rebel-held areas near Damascus," British Foreign Secretary William Hague said in a statement.

Hague said reports of the attack remained uncorroborated and that Britain was urgently seeking more information.

"But it is clear that if they are verified, it would mark a shocking escalation in the use of chemical weapons in Syria," he said, adding that Britain would try to hold to account anyone who used chemical weapons or ordered their use.

"I call on the Syrian government to allow immediate access to the area for the U.N. team currently investigating previous allegations of chemical weapons use. The U.K. will be raising this incident at the U.N. Security Council," Hague said.

French President François Hollande called on U.N. inspectors to visit the site of the alleged chemical attack as well.

"With regard to the information coming out of Syria, the president asks that the U.N. goes to the site," spokesperson Najat Vallaud-Belkacem told reporters in Paris.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said Thursday that if the reports prove true, "there would have to be reaction with force in Syria from the international community, but there is no question of sending troops on the ground."

Fabius added that if the Security Council could not make a decision, one would have to be taken "in other ways." He did not elaborate.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said Berlin is "very worried about the reports that poison gas has been used near Damascus."

"These reports are very serious and if they are confirmed would be outrageous. We call for this clarification to be made possible promptly and for the United Nations chemical weapons experts who are now in the country be given access immediately to check these accusations," he said.

Turkey also called for a U.N. probe, saying it was monitoring the situation "with great concern."

"Light must immediately be shed on these claims, and the United Nations mission that was formed to investigate chemical weapons claims in Syria should look into these claims and reveal its findings," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "If these allegations are found to be true, it will be inevitable for the international community to take the necessary stance and give the necessary response to this savagery and crime against humanity."

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu added, "All red lines have been crossed, but still the U.N. Security Council has not even been able to take a decision. This is a responsibility for the sides who still set these red lines and for all of us."

Saudi Arabia also responded to the Syrian rebel reports and called on the Security Council to take action.

"It is time for the Security Council to shoulder its responsibility and overcome differences between its members and restore the confidence of the international community by convening immediately to issue a clear and deterrent

resolution that will put an end to this human crisis,” Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said in a statement.

Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby called for United Nations inspectors to immediately investigate reports of the chemical attack, Egypt’s state news agency MENA reports.

The secretary general said in a statement he was surprised this deplorable crime would happen during the visit of a team of international investigators with the United Nations who are already tasked with investigating chemical weapons use, MENA reports. He called on the inspectors to head immediately to the eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, to determine what happened.

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