

UN Chemical Weapons Experts in Syria

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A UN employee shaking hands with Angela Kane, the head of the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs, in Damascus. **Khaled al-Hariri**

A senior United Nations team tasked with investigating the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria's civil war has begun a mission to Damascus, trying to hammer out with Syrian officials the terms for their investigation.

It is the first such trip by international experts, and the talks were expected to be thorny — focusing on about a dozen incidents in which chemical arms were allegedly used. The rebels, the U.S. and others have accused the government of using the weapons of mass destruction, while Damascus and its ally Russia have blamed the rebels.

The delegation's arrival coincided with intense fighting in neighborhoods on the edge of the capital.

Activists and residents reported heavy clashes in the Jobar district, parts of which are held by rebels trying to topple President Bashar Assad. Several mortar shells fired from Jobar

crashed into residential neighborhoods in Damascus.

"I was in the bedroom and my parents were in the sitting room when a mortar shell crashed into our apartment," said Jawad Nathem, 22. "Everything turned into dust and glass and shrapnel flew everywhere."

No one was hurt. "God saved us," Nathem said later from the damaged apartment on the ninth floor.

The UN team was invited by the Syrian government to discuss the terms of a possible inquiry into the alleged chemical weapons attacks.

Damascus has agreed that the UN investigate only one of the reported chemical weapons attacks — a March 19 incident in the northern village of Khan al-Assal in which rebels and the government accuse each other of using chemicals weapons — but rejected inquiries into other alleged attack sites in the central city of Homs, Damascus and elsewhere.

The U.S. and UN have called on Assad's regime to grant the United Nations team unfettered access to investigate all allegations of chemical weapon use.

Swedish chemical weapons expert Ake Sellstrom and UN disarmament chief Angela Kane arrived from neighboring Lebanon for a two-day visit, during which they are set to meet with senior Syrian officials, the UN said in a brief statement issued in the Syrian capital.

The Assad regime is said to have one of the world's largest stockpiles of chemical weapons, including mustard gas and the nerve agent sarin.

There are concerns that Assad might use them on a large scale, transfer some of them to the Lebanese militant Hezbollah group or that the chemical agents could fall into the hands of al-Qaida militants and other extremists among the rebels.

Khan al-Assal, on the southwestern edge of the embattled city of Aleppo, was under government control in March but was captured by the rebels earlier this week. Even if the UN team is granted access to Khan al-Assal by both sides, it may be difficult to find evidence from the attack because so much time has passed.

In June, the U.S. said it had conclusive evidence that Assad's regime used chemical weapons against opposition forces. That crossed what President Barack Obama called a "red line," prompting a U.S. decision to begin arming rebel groups, although that has not happened yet.

On Monday, however, there were reports that Syrian rebels said they expected to receive the arms in August after two congressional committees approved the statements, RIA Novosti reported.

The main Western-backed Syrian opposition group has welcomed the decision by the Obama administration to send arms to rebels fighting to topple President Bashar Assad's regime.

The Syrian National Coalition says it's a "move forward."

President Barack Obama opposed providing any lethal assistance to Syria's rebels until last

month.

Russia has warned that U.S. military aid to Syrian rebels may lead to further escalation of violence in the country and that such support could lead to extreme Islamist elements in the Syrian opposition seizing power in the country.

On Tuesday, UN mideast envoy Robert Serry told the Security Council that the UN has received 13 reports of alleged chemical weapons use in Syria. He said Sellstrom's team is studying this and other material.

Russia, Syria's close ally, has called the chemical weapons allegations against Assad's regime groundless, claiming Russian experts determined that Syrian rebels made sarin nerve gas and used it in the Khan al-Assal attack, in which 31 people died.

More than 93,000 people have been killed since the Syrian conflict started in March 2011, according to UN estimates.

In other violence Wednesday, state-run media said a volleyball coach who was a former national team player was killed in an ambush near Damascus.

The state news agency said 34-year-old Firas al-Eid, who coached the women's national youth team, was killed when gunmen fired at his car as he was driving from Homs to Damascus late Tuesday.

A Syrian General Sports Federation official, Tareq Hatem, told SANA on Wednesday that "terrorists" were behind the attack, a term the government uses for rebels.

The countryside between Damascus and Homs, Syria's third largest city, has recently been the scene of heavy fighting between government troops and rebels.

Activists said masked gunmen stormed a media center in the northern rebel-held town of Saraqeb Wednesday, kidnapping a Polish journalist and beating a well-known Syrian activist, Manhal Barish.

An activist near the town identified the journalist as Marcin Suder. He spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing retaliation.

Suder's Polish agency, Studio Melon, said it had seen the reports but could not confirm he had been kidnapped.

Studio Melon's Andrzej Wyszynski said Suder has been in frequent contact with the agency since traveling to Syria in early July and last corresponded via e-mail on Tuesday. Wyszynski said Suder has worked in Afghanistan and other conflict zones and was reporting from Syria as a freelancer.

Marcin Bosacki, a spokesman for Poland's Foreign Ministry, said, "We don't have confirmation. We are urgently analyzing the matter."

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