

Syria Opposition Demands Urgent UN Probe Into Alleged Chemical Attacks

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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BEIRUT/AMMAN — Syria's opposition demanded Thursday that United Nations chemical weapons inspectors immediately investigate a besieged rebel-held region hit by an alleged chemical weapons attack that killed hundreds of people a day earlier.

In Paris, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said the international community needed to respond with force if the allegations that the Syrian government was responsible for a chemical attack on civilians proved true, although there was no question of sending troops on the ground.

Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces have continued a heavy bombardment of the ring of rebel-held suburbs around the capital, known as the Ghouta region, which activists say will further hinder UN investigators from entering the area, only a few kilometers from the team's Damascus hotel.

“We are asking for this team to go directly, with complete freedom ... to the site of the crimes which took place yesterday,” said George Sabra, a prominent member of the umbrella opposition’s National Coalition.

He said the UN Security Council should amend the mission of the team, tasked with investigating a few sites of previous alleged chemical attacks, to give it the right to visit any site.

“But we are doubtful because the mission of these experts is constrained by the Syrian regime, limited to a few areas which it will take them to,” he said by telephone.

With Wednesday’s death toll estimated at between 500 and 1,300, which would make it the world’s most lethal chemical weapons attack since the 1980s, an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council was prompted in New York. Syrian authorities have denied the army used chemical weapons.

Opposition activists said men, women and children were killed as they slept. Activists say several towns in Ghouta were hit with rockets loaded with poison gas at dawn Wednesday.

The Security Council did not explicitly demand a UN investigation of the incident, although it said “clarity” was needed and welcomed UN chief Ban Ki-moon’s calls for a prompt investigation by the inspection team in Syria, led by Ake Sellstrom.

An earlier Western-drafted statement submitted to the Security Council was not approved. The final version of the statement was watered down to accommodate objections from Russia and China, diplomats said. Moscow and Beijing have vetoed previous Western efforts to impose UN penalties on Assad.

Many rebels and activists in the opposition area say they lost interest in UN investigations or help from Western powers abroad.

“The families of Ghouta have lost hope in any investigation committees, which have offered us no relief since the revolution began two years ago ... We are 7 kilometers away, just a 5 minute car ride from where they are staying. We’re being exterminated with poison gas while they drink their coffee and sit inside their hotels,” said activist Bara Abdelraman, speaking by Skype.

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