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Syria Peace Talks Derailed as Talk of Intervention Intensifies

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Syria's President Bashar al-Assad

The Syrian opposition on Monday ruled out any chance of peace talks next month as President Vladimir Putin and UK Prime Minister David Cameron discussed the crisis over the phone and Russia warned the West against military intervention.

The news of the opposition's refusal to participate in peace talks came after a UN inspection team came under fire from snipers as they approached the site of an alleged chemical attack that killed more than 1,000 people in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta.

The purported chemical attack occurred in the early morning on Aug. 21, killing civilian men, women and children as they slept.

Calls for military intervention intensified in the immediate aftermath of the attack, which activists said was carried out by authorities and Russia says was done by Syrian rebels to lure

the West into war and derail peace talks.

But even as the UN team began its work Monday — after coming under fire by unidentified snipers, according to The Associated Press — several Western nations have said Syria's granting of access to the site of the attack was too little, too late.

European countries have called for an immediate reaction, with both the UK and Turkey saying a military intervention could take place without the authority of the UN Security Council, since Russia and China would likely veto the move.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the statement "astonishing" and said intervention would be a "grave violation of international law," as well as of recent agreements reached at the G8 Summit in Northern Ireland that authorized the UN Security Council to make a decision on what actions should be taken in case of a chemical attack in Syria.

If the deaths in Eastern Ghouta are found to have been caused by a chemical attack, it would be the world's most lethal chemical attack since the 1980s. It is not clear, however, how long the UN team's investigation will take.

Putin's conversation with Cameron on Monday, the details of which are unclear, was initiated by the British side.

Russia has said the attack was likely a provocation by Syrian rebels who wanted Western nations to intervene in order to foil plans for a peace conference in Geneva next month. The peace conference has now been postponed for an indefinite amount of time, with rebels saying they want an "unconditional surrender" from the current regime before they'll sit down to talk.

A member of the Syrian National Coalition said on Monday that the recent attack changed matters for the opposition, who now must "punish this dictator, Bashar the Chemist" before Geneva peace talks can even be discussed, Reuters reported.

Lavrov said the statements made by Western governments about an intervention were reminiscent of intimidating comments made just before military invasions in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. He expressed doubt that Western authorities would take the results of the UN investigation into whether or not chemical weapons were used into consideration.

The U.S. and its allies have said that the rebels could not have used the weapons as Russia has claimed, since they had no access to the chemicals, and the fact that the UN team got access to the site only four days after the attack indicated that any evidence of chemical weapons had likely already been destroyed by the government.

In an interview with pro-Kremlin Izvestia published Monday, President Bashar Assad called the accusations nonsense and said they lacked any logic, echoing Russia's claim that the attack was carried out by rebels.

"Would any state use chemicals or any other weapons of mass destruction in a place where its own forces are concentrated? That would go against elementary logic. So accusations of this kind are entirely political," he said, adding that any U.S. intervention in Syria would be bound to fail.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, head of the Middle East Institute, a think tank specializing in Middle East studies, said there was no chance that the attack had been carried out by Assad's order, and that it was more likely an attempt by rebels to draw Western states into the war because they knew they were outnumbered by Assad's army.

Satanovsky voiced an argument similar to that of Assad himself: "A chemical weapon is a weapon of mass destruction, it is impossible that Assad used it in the capital where his own army is located," he said.

He offered a different explanation for the attack, saying it may have been carried out by Assad's brother, Maher, an army commander with access to chemical weapons facilities.

"He has very bad relations with Assad and if the latter found out that his brother was involved in the attack, he would kill him," Satanovsky said.

Last year, U.S. President Barack Obama said the use of chemical weapons would constitute the crossing of a "red line," warranting a response from the international community. The New York Times reported that Obama hasn't yet made a decision after the latest attack, but cited an unidentified senior Obama administration official as saying there was "very little doubt" that Assad's military forces had used chemical weapons against civilians.

Britain's Foreign Secretary William Hague told BBC Radio 4 that diplomatic methods had so far been unable to keep the situation under control, and that the UK shared the position of the U.S. and France.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu supported Hague's idea of using force despite the UN Security Council and confirmed that Turkey would take part in the intervention.

The Guardian reported that the UK's chief of the defense staff, General Sir Nick Houghton, was meeting with U.S. General Martin Dempsey and other allied military chiefs in Jordan on Monday to discuss military options.

France's President François Hollande told Le Parisien that a decision would be made this week.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Saturday that a political solution should be found for the Syrian conflict, but Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said in a statement on Monday that Germany "would be among those who consider consequences to be appropriate," if a chemical attack were confirmed.

Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies, said by phone that any intervention on Syrian territory would lead to a reaction from Russia in regards to the U.S., though Russia would only use non-military measures.

He added, however, that since bilateral relations were already in poor shape, there wouldn't be many options for how to influence the U.S. decision.

Ultimately, Satanovsky said, there's nothing that Russia could do to counter an intervention.

"There are no strong economic ties with the U.S., they in no way depend on Russia, just as

Russia doesn't depend on the U.S.," he said.

"Obama's visit to the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg will be completely ruined if there is an intervention, but the most Russia can do is cancel another meeting with Obama or reduce ties with the U.S. in general," Makarkin said.

Meanwhile, Assad told Izvestia that Syria's trade with Russia would not be affected by the crisis or pressure from the U.S. and other Western nations.

"All of the contracts are being fulfilled," he said.

TIMELINE — Events since reported poison gas attack in Syria
Aug. 22 — United Nations chemical weapons inspectors in Syria met and took samples from victims of an apparent poison gas attack in a rebel-held suburb of Damascus on Monday after the UN team themselves survived a sniper attack on their convoy. Following are the main events that unfolded after reports of the use of nerve gas on Aug. 21 first emerged.

• Aug. 21 — Syria's opposition accuses government forces of gassing hundreds of people by firing rockets that released deadly fumes over rebel-held Damascus suburbs killing men, women and children as they slept. If confirmed, it would be the worst chemical weapons attack in 25 years. • UN Security Council holds an emergency meeting and calls for "clarity" on the attack. Western powers demand immediate on-site investigation by UN chemical weapons experts. Russia says attack looks like a rebel "provocation" to discredit Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. • Aug. 22 — United Nations chief and Western powers urge Syria to give UN experts immediate access to rebel-held Damascus suburbs where the gas attack occurred. Assad's government is silent and UN inspectors remain confined to a Damascus hotel. • A U.S. official versed in initial intelligence assessments says the attack appears to be the work of the Assad government, but Washington says it will await confirmation of the details, including the perpetrator, before taking any forceful action. • Aug. 23 — The United States starts repositioning naval forces in the Mediterranean to give President Barack Obama the option for an armed strike on Syria, although officials say he has made no decision on military action. Obama says the attack is of "grave concern", but the ability of Washington to solve the Syrian crisis is "overstated". • The Syrian opposition coalition says samples from victims of the gas attack have been smuggled out of Syria for testing by UN experts. • Aug. 24 — Obama hashes out military options with top advisers and, speaking with major ally British Prime Minister David Cameron, agrees any use of poison gas by Assad's forces would merit a "serious response".	• The Syrian government reports its soldiers had found chemical weapons in suburban Damascus tunnels used by rebels — evidence, it says, the insurgents were to blame. • In the most authoritative account yet, medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres says three hospitals near Damascus reported 355 deaths in the space of three hours, out of about 3,600 people admitted with nerve gas-type symptoms after the reported attacks. • Aug. 25 — Assad agrees to let United Nations inspect the suspected gas attack site, with a local ceasefire in place to protect inspectors. But a U.S. official says the offer is "too late to be credible". The U.S. remarks appear to signal an increasing likelihood of a military response against Assad. • France, broadly reflecting views of other Western powers, says it is resolved not to let the chemical attack go unpunished. Russia welcomes the decision on U.N. access but warns it will be a "tragic mistake" to jump to conclusions over who was to blame. • Aug. 26 — UN experts cross civil war front lines to reach the nerve gas attack site where they examine victims. En route, the UN team's convoy comes under sniper fire, which disables one vehicle, but no one is hurt. Opposition activists blame pro-Assad militiamen for the shooting. • Underlining diplomatic difficulties in forging international agreement, France says Russia and China would probably veto a UN Security Council move to strike Assad. Britain says it would be possible to respond to a chemical weapon attack without the Security Council's backing.

— Reuters

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