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Hagel: U.S. Military Stands Ready to Strike Syria

By The Moscow Times

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UN experts visiting a patient in Mouadamiya on Monday to determine whether claims of a gas attack are true. **Abo Alnour Alhaji**

The U.S. military stands ready to strike Syria at once if President Barack Obama gives the order, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said Tuesday as the U.S. prepared to formally declare that chemical weapons had been used in Syria's civil war.

U.S. officials said the growing intelligence pointed strongly toward Bashar Assad's government as the culprit in the chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs last week that activists say killed hundreds of people — a claim Assad called "preposterous."

The U.S., along with allies in Europe, appeared to be laying the groundwork for the most aggressive response since the civil war began more than two years ago.

Two administration officials said the U.S. was expected to make public a more formal

determination of chemical weapons use Tuesday, with an announcement of Obama's response likely to follow quickly. The officials insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss the internal deliberations.

Secretary of State John Kerry has called the evidence of a large-scale chemical weapons attack "undeniable." He said international standards against chemical weapons "cannot be violated without consequences."

Any U.S. military action in Syria most likely would involve sea-launched cruise missile attacks on military targets. Officials said it was likely the targets would be tied to the regime's ability to launch chemical weapons attacks. Possible targets would include weapons arsenals, command and control centers, radar and communications facilities and other military headquarters.

Less likely was a strike on a chemical weapons site because of the risk of releasing toxic gases.

Hagel told BBC television Tuesday that the Defense Department had "moved assets in place to be able to fulfill and comply with whatever option the president wishes to take." The Navy has four destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean Sea within range of targets inside Syria. The U.S. also has warplanes in the region.

"We are ready to go," said Hagel, speaking during a visit to the Southeast Asian nation of Brunei.

Hagel said "to me it's clearer and clearer" that the Syrian government was responsible but that the Obama administration was waiting for intelligence agencies to make the determination.

In London, Prime Minister David Cameron recalled Parliament for an urgent discussion Thursday on a possible military response. The British government said its military was drawing up contingency plans for a possible military attack. Italy, meanwhile, insisted that any strike must be authorized by the UN Security Council.

Assad has denied launching a chemical attack. In an interview published Tuesday on the website of the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency, Assad warned that if the U.S. attacks Syria, it will face "what it has been confronted with in every war since Vietnam: failure."

Syrian activists say the Aug. 21 chemical attack killed hundreds. The group Doctors Without Borders put the death toll at 355 people.

A United Nations team already on the ground in Syria has collected evidence from last week's attack. The team came under sniper fire Monday as it traveled to the site of the Aug. 21 attack and on Tuesday delayed a second inspection.

The U.S. said Syria's delay in giving the inspectors access rendered their investigation meaningless, and officials said the administration had its own intelligence confirming chemical weapons use and planned to make it public in the coming days.

It is unlikely that the U.S. would launch a strike against Syria while the UN team is still in the country. A UN spokeswoman said the inspection team might need longer than the planned 14

days to complete its work.

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