

Syria Credits Putin While Handing over Last of Declared Chemical Weapons

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The Syrian Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Monday it had eliminated chemical weapons from its arsenal despite difficult security circumstances caused by its ongoing civil war.

It credited the "firm political will of Syrian President Bashar Assad and the initiative of the President Vladimir Putin" to give up the arsenal under the supervision of the United Nations Security Council.

"This significant achievement is further evidence that Syria adheres to its international commitments," the Syrian statement said.

Syria's government agreed to surrender its arsenal last fall when the U.S. threatened punitive missile strikes after a chemical attack on a rebel-held suburb of Damascus believed to have killed more than a thousand people.

Ahmet Uzumcu, the director general of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical

Weapons, also known as OPCW, confirmed the final 8 percent of the 1,300-ton stockpile, which included mustard gas and raw materials for making sarin nerve gas, have been loaded onto Danish and Norwegian ships in the Syrian port of Latakia, said Ahmet Uzumcu.

Uzumcu described Syrian government cooperation as "satisfactory."

Mission chief Kaag said that although the chemicals will not be destroyed by an initial June 30 target date, "we are very pleased with meeting this milestone."

"It is not every day, or rather it's the first time, that a country at war accedes to a chemical weapons convention," she said.

Some doubts remain as to whether Syria has seen the last use of toxic chemicals in warfare however.

Following an investigation last month, an OPCW fact-finding mission found evidence that chlorine gas has been used as a weapon in fighting between rebels and Assad's government. But a May 27 attack on the fact-finding mission prevented it from inspecting an alleged site in the village of Kfar Zeita, 200 kilometers north of Damascus. It stopped short of saying which side was to blame.

Chlorine is a common industrial chemical and not considered a chemical weapon, though using any toxic material as a weapon is illegal under international law.

The chemicals shipped out of Syria Monday are being transported to a second ship, the U.S.-owned MV Cape Ray, which is equipped with facilities to render them inert.

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