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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Activists Claim Evidence of Russian Cluster Bombs in Syria

By The Moscow Times

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Residents walk near a damaged building at a site hit by what activists said were airstrikes carried out yesterday by the Russian air force on the town of Abtaa, Deraa, Syria.

A group of Russian activists said on Thursday they had evidence that Russian aircraft deployed in Syria were armed with cluster bombs, challenging official denials.

Last month, the international rights group Human Rights Watch said recent evidence on the ground suggested that Russia had either dropped cluster bombs in Syria, provided a new batch to the Syrian airforce, or both. Russia's Defense Ministry denied HRW's allegations.

But the Conflict Intelligence Team, a group of Russian investigative bloggers, on Thursday published photos and video footage taken from Russian media and the Defense Ministry which the group said showed the munitions at the Hmeymin airbase in Syria, which is used by the Russian airforce.

A duty officer at the Defense Ministry on Thursday said it could not immediately comment on the report because of a public holiday.

Cluster munitions are containers that explode in the air to distribute smaller bombs over a large area.

Russia is not a signatory to a 2008 United Nations treaty, which bans their use because of their indiscriminate nature and the threat to civilians posed by unexploded bomblets.

Conflict Intelligence Team said in its report that as a successor to the USSR, Russia is bound by a Geneva Convention that prohibits indiscriminate attacks that harm civilians.

The group said the photos and film footage showed RBK-500 SPBE-D, RBK-500 SHOAB-0.5 and RBK-500 AO-2.5RTM cluster bombs on Russian aircraft deployed in Syria.

Russia began a large-scale aerial bombing campaign in Syria on Sept. 30, targeting opponents of Syria's President Bashar Assad.

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