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Putin Says Syrian Rebels Plan to Frame Assad for Future Chemical Weapons Attacks

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Kremlin Press Service

Standing alongside visiting Italian President Sergio Mattarella in Moscow on Tuesday, Vladimir Putin rejected allegations that the Syrian government recently used chemical weapons to kill more than 70 civilians in the province of Idlib, and said the White House's military response resembles the events of 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq on unfounded claims that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Putin also warned that anti-government forces in Syria are preparing "provocations" using chemical weapons, intending to blame Damascus, in order to invite more U.S. airstrikes against government targets. The Russian president said these false-flag operations are being planned in Damascus and other areas across the country.

"We have information from different sources that similar provocations — this is the only

word for it — are being prepared in different regions of Syria, including in the southern suburbs of Damascus, where they're planning to spread some kind of substance and blame Syrian officials for using it," Putin said.

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Speaking to reporters after the president's press conference, Russian Lieutenant General Sergei Rudskoi confirmed Putin's remarks, saying that rebels have been bringing certain poisonous substances into the areas of Khan-Sheikhun, the Dzhira airfield, East Gutu, and the suburbs of Aleppo.

"I'm reminded of our great writers Ilf and Petrov," Putin said. "I want to say, 'This is boring, girls!' We've already seen and witnessed all this!'

Putin was remembering a scene from "The Twelve Chairs," where the conman Ostap Bender tries to convince a provincial Soviet town to make a bad investment in a chess club.

Also on Tuesday, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson landed in Moscow for his first official visit to Russia since taking office. He is expected to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, but not with President Putin.

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