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Tillerson Says Russia Is Responsible for Syrian Chemical Use

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Rex Tillerson / Andrew Harrer / Bloomberg

(Bloomberg) — Russia is ultimately responsible for chemical weapons use by the Syrian regime and should stop blocking United Nations resolutions seeking to investigate alleged violations of a 2013 accord to remove chemical weapons from Syria, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said.

Russia, at a minimum, should abstain during United Nations Security Council votes, Tillerson said Tuesday in Paris at the end of a 24-nation meeting aimed at creating a "partnership" to punish chemical weapon use.

"The facts are known and documented," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, standing alongside Tillerson, said. "But we face obstruction by several countries." In November, Russia vetoed the renewal of a UN body that had investigated chemical use in Syria.

At a hastily-convened meeting of the Security Council on Tuesday, Russia circulated a

proposal for a new mechanism to investigate future chemical attacks.

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U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley dismissed the proposal and said the meeting was Russia's plan to "distract from a new French initiative to hold accountable those who use chemical weapons."

Chlorine Attack

Haley said Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad's latest atrocities include chlorine gas attacks against civilians during recent fighting in Eastern Ghouta, scene of a previous gas attack in 2013 that almost led to U.S. and French air strikes before Assad agreed to a U.S.-Russian accord to transfer his government's chemical weapons stocks out of the country.

Tillerson said there is evidence the regime continues to hold chemical weapons.

"Russia should look in the mirror before bringing us to the Security Council to talk about chemical weapons," Haley said on Tuesday. "Russia has looked the other way when their Syrian friends use these despicable weapons of war."

Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia called the previous United Nations investigations deeply flawed and tainted by Western political pressure to vilify the Assad's regime.

The U.S. "betrays itself" through the insistence that they don't really need an impartial investigative mechanism, Nebenzia said, adding that the U.S. wishes to be both "judge and accuser."

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The latest attack took place Monday when Syrian forces launched rockets loaded with chlorine gas at rebel positions in Eastern Ghouta, according to the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which tracks the conflict.

Last November, Russia used its veto to block the renewal of a panel of experts, known as the Joint Investigative Mechanism, which had identified Assad's forces as being responsible for a sarin nerve agent attack on the rebel-held village of Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 that killed at least 83 people and sickened close to 300.

That attack prompted President Donald Trump to order a cruise missile strike on an airfield that U.S. said had been used by Assad's air force to initiate the attack.

France on Tuesday imposed sanctions on 24 people and entities it says are responsible for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. "We want you to know that we know who you are, and that we will not cease our pursuit," Le Drian said.

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