



Chemical weapon use in Syria?

by Jean Pascal Zanders

On 19 March 2013, a serious allegation was made concerning the use of chemical weapons (CW) near Aleppo, Syria. Both the Syrian government and insurgent forces accused each other of having carried out the attack in which some 25 people were reportedly killed and many more injured. If proven, the incident would represent a major escalation in the conflict - and indeed a first since the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1997. Some countries, notably some EU member states and the US, have repeatedly indicated that chemical warfare represents a red line which, once crossed, could lead to military intervention. On 21 March, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced that he is activating the mechanism at his disposal to investigate the allegation. The EU is a strong supporter of global chemical disarmament and could play a role that would benefit the UN Secretary-General's investigative mechanism, the potential victims of chemical attacks and, ultimately, the process of eliminating all non-conventional weapons in the Middle East.

Checking the claim(s)

At first, the allegation by the Syrian government appeared to be serious. High casualty rates suggested that a weapon in Syria's CW arsenal might have been captured and used by a rebel group. Film footage and pictures showing chaotic scenes typical of a hospital overwhelmed by a mass-casualty incident seemed to back up the claim. The rebels swiftly denied responsibility and, in turn, accused

the Syrian army. Russia, in a surprise move, strongly backed the government claim.

Upon closer examination of the images, however, doubts began to arise. No additional footage, whether official or taken by witnesses with mobile phones, emerged of either the incident site or the dead victims. None of the people shown inside the hospital display external signs of exposure to chemical warfare agents, at least not to the types commonly associated with Syria's CW stockpiles, namely mustard gas (blistering agent) or sarin and VX (nerve agents). Nobody was seen wearing protective equipment, such as gas masks and protective clothing, and no evidence was visible of decontamination or measures to prevent secondary contamination of individuals and equipment. Many people shown were clearly not emergency medical staff: mothers sat next to children attached to infusion pumps; other individuals assisting some wounded to walk. Had one of the combat toxicants been used, these civilians would most likely have died or been seriously injured through secondary contamination.

Although some statements hinted at pesticide use (nerve agents are chemically close to organophosphorus pesticides), most reports point to chlorine. Chlorine was used massively during the first major CW attack near Ieper/Ypres, Belgium, on 22 April 1915, but the belligerents quickly abandoned it because of its limited military value. And today chlorine still has widespread legitimate civilian use (e.g. for water purification).



This claim is intrinsically problematic. Exposure to chlorine stored in a warehouse or near a production installation hit by a shell could account for respiratory problems and skin irritation, but not for a high number of fatalities. One would need a very high volume of the agent to obtain lethal doses in open air; the explosion would most likely destroy part of the agent; and highly recognisable evidence of corrosion at the site of attack could not be missed.

More recent accounts specify that Islamic extremists filled a

home-made rocket with chlorine dissolved in a saline solution. The agent would thus amount to *Eau de Javel* (bleach). Even in its highest industrial concentration of 40%, the agent cannot explain the fatalities, even if one were to assume that a very large number of home-made rockets hit the target in a tight cluster.

The Syrian government formally requested the UN Secretary-General to investigate this alleged use of CW. Using his authority under UNGA Resolution 42/37C (1987) and UNSC Resolution 620 (1988), Ban Ki-moon announced the investigation on 21 March and conferred with two specialised organisations - the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) - to assist him with the mission (the UN has bilateral agreements with both organisations to this end). This is the first serious allegation of CW use since the entry into force of the CWC in 1997 and the first time that the OPCW is launching an onsite investigation. With respect to chemical warfare, the UN Secretary-General last invoked the investigative mechanism in 1992 during the civil war in Mozambique.

What EU could do

The real concern about this episode is that, in the past, allegations of enemy chemical attacks have almost always preceded the initiation of chemical warfare. Syria's chemical arsenal serves a strategic purpose: it is an instrument to be used only in case of an existential threat to the country (and, presumably, regime). The Assad regime shows many signs of crumbling, and its collapse may be imminent. The international investigation is therefore both timely and necessary.

The EU supports the global elimination of CW and backs the OPCW with action plans. On 8–19 April

2013, the states party to the CWC will convene for the Third Review Conference of the CWC. Current developments in Syria will undoubtedly feature prominently in the assessment of its current status and the future work of the OPCW.

In this context, the EU could consider issuing a general statement denouncing all use of chemical weapons. In view that the OPCW and WHO will

‘The real concern about this episode is that, in the past, allegations of enemy chemical attacks have almost always preceded the initiation of chemical warfare.’

indeed conduct the on-site investigation of alleged use of CW, the EU might also consider

supporting the mission. Such support might come in the form of a direct financial contribution or a statement that a specific sum of EU money will be made available through the OPCW and/or WHO to assist victims of chemical warfare if the allegation were confirmed or in the event of future CW incidents. In the case of the CWC, the contribution can be framed according to Article X on ‘Assistance and Protection against Chemical Weapons’.

These measures, if announced prior to any major or proven CW incident (and ahead of the CWC Review Conference), may also facilitate EU interaction with the post-conflict Syrian government, not only with regard to future humanitarian assistance and reconstruction programmes, but also with a view to Syria's future adherence to the CWC as an additional step towards the ‘universalisation’ of the Convention itself – a declared EU goal.

Finally, such measures could also open up opportunities for discussions with Arab countries on the creation of a zone free of non-conventional weapons in the Middle East, whether through direct diplomatic action or through the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium. Similarly, by demonstrating in practice that the security of a state can and will be ensured through the implementation of Article X, the EU could help convince the other two states in the region not yet party to the CWC - Egypt and Israel - of the tangible benefits that the convention provides.

Jean Pascal Zanders is a Senior Research Fellow at the EUISS. His focus is on disarmament and non-proliferation.

