

Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control
Vladimir Yermakov's remarks a joint Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry
briefing on investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, Kubinka,
June 22,

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Ladies and gentlemen!

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Russia's position of principle is that the use of chemical weapons by anyone anywhere is absolutely unacceptable under any conditions. Those guilty of these crimes, provided their guilt is proven, must be brought to account.

This is why we not only supported but co-authored UN Security Council Resolution 2235 in 2015. As everyone remembers, Resolution 2235 established a Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) of the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to investigate the use of chemicals as weapons in Syria. We believed, naturally, that the JIM and the other mechanism that existed at the time, the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), would hold objective and highly professional investigations to identify the guilty parties on the basis of hard facts. Regrettably, our expectations did not materialise. The reason for this has been put forth by our military, who know the situation in the hostility zones in Syria from their own experience.

Another thing of major significance is that Russia has never demanded anything extraordinary from these two mechanisms. We only insisted that they act in strict compliance with the provisions of their mandates and the Chemical Weapons Convention. The curious thing is that our Western colleagues, who make a show of their commitment to international law, in this case did all they could to find a pretext for not complying with their own rules.

Let us take a look at what happened and continues to happen in Syria. Let us go to the roots of the developments. How did it all start?

Since 2011, the United States has been threatening, without any good reason and at various levels, including at a presidential level, to take military action against Syria if it crossed the mythical "red line" by using chemical weapons.

No hard facts of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Government have been provided. At the same time, various anti-government forces, including the terrorist groups supported by the United States and its allies, started using chemical weapons increasingly more often.

On March 19, 2013, an opposition group launched an improvised rocket filled with sarin at Khan al-Assal, Aleppo. The attack resulted in 28 fatalities, 17 of them Syrian servicemen, and over 130 injuries of various degrees of severity. Damascus immediately took measures to initiate the chemical and biological investigation mechanism of the UN Secretary-General. However, a UN mission led by Professor Ake Sellstrom (Sweden) arrived in Syria only on August 14, 2013, after months of procrastination staged by the US, France and Britain at the UN Security Council.

The Western countries' unwillingness to take measures at the UN Security Council to prevent real rather than imaginary threats has created a situation when the terrorist groups went unpunished and had enough time to stage a much larger sarin attack in Eastern Ghouta, Damascus, on August 21, 2013. They cynically timed the attack for the arrival of the UN Mission led by Dr Sellstrom and, of course, did their best to shift the blame for the attack on the Syrian Government. Over 1,500 people were injured in the heinous Ghouta attack.

In order to prevent any possible outside military interference in the intra-Syrian conflict, President of Russia Vladimir Putin proposed that Syria join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) without delay, declare its chemical stockpiles and place them under international control with the view to destroying them.

On September 14, 2013, talks between Russia and the US in Geneva resulted in a framework agreement supported by a resolution of the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and UN Security Council Resolution 2118. A plan, unprecedented in scale, was devised to move the main elements of Syria's chemical stockpiles out of the country and then destroy them.

The international operation to move all chemical weapons components and their precursors out of Syria was completed on June 23, 2014. All in all, 1,200 metric tonnes of toxic agents were removed from the country, and 100 metric tonnes of isopropanol, one of the less toxic agents, were destroyed on the ground. The operation to destroy Syria's chemical weapons started on July 7, 2014 on board Cape Ray, a specialised US ship, and was completed on August 18, 2014. The reaction mass resulting from the hydrolysis of toxic compounds was recycled at industrial plants in Finland and Germany, and the precursors in Great Britain and the US, including methylphosphonyldifluoride (DF), a sarin precursor. (It is quite telling that the US had full access to the composition and technology of Syrian-made sarin, since some of the sarin precursors were recycled on board Cape Ray. Moreover, as part of its accession to CWC in 2013, Damascus transmitted to the OPCW detailed data on sarin production methods. Consequently, the fact that sarin used on April 4, 2017 in Khan-Sheikhoun contained DF cannot be viewed as "clear evidence" of its use by the Syrian government troops).

With assistance of Russia and other members of the international community Syria completed an operation of unprecedented scale for the OPCW to move chemical weapons stockpiles out of the country within an all-time record low of six months, while leading an extremely challenging struggle against international terrorism on its territory. The actual destruction of stockpiles took place outside Syria and was completed, albeit with a slight delay, by the end of 2015, which was caused by technical issues faced by our US partners (a one-year delay at a V?olia plant).

Consequently, Syria's chemical weapons capability was liquidated in its entirety under OPCW's strict supervision. All this was solely attributable to the good will and dedication of the Syrian Government, as well as the proactive contribution by OPCW member countries. The elimination of Syria's chemical weapons was confirmed by Director General of OPCW's Technical Secretariat, Ahmet Üzümcü, on January 4, 2016. As of today, 27 former chemical weapons infrastructure facilities were destroyed, and 25 of them underwent full verification.

This could have been a very positive story on Syria's chemical disarmament, which could pave the way to further constructive efforts to build an inclusive regional security framework. However a positive outcome was something Western countries could not accept by any means. What they wanted was actually the opposite: to destabilise Syria and destroy Assad's regime.

The old inhumane and unheard-of schemes tested by the West in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya to destroy their statehood were engaged once again.

What followed was a series of fake news alleging that chlorine-based weapons were used in Syria. The choice of chlorine gas does not seem incidental. In fact, chlorine is one of the most common and ubiquitous chemical compounds, while it is almost impossible to detect it, even within a short time after its use, due to its extreme volatility. It is also impossible to place it under international control of any kind.

There is also another pattern that does not seem to be a mere coincidence. A series of chlorine gas attacks took place immediately after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2209 on March 6, 2015 which condemned "in the strongest terms any use of any toxic chemical, such as chlorine, as a weapon in the Syrian Arab Republic" and decided "in the event of future non-compliance with resolution 2118 to impose measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter."

There are a number of questions in this respect.

First, why would experts who used to work for Syria's chemical weapons programme experiment with creating barrel bombs containing chlorine, while being in possession of full-fledged toxic compounds, as our Western colleagues now allege?

Second, how insane should the Syrian authorities be to position themselves as war criminals and outcasts? Maybe these fakes on the chemical attacks in Syria were merely an orchestrated campaign that played into the hands of the opponents of Syria's legitimate government?

In any case, one fact is clear: using chemical weapons did not make any sense in military or strategic terms and was absolutely suicidal in political terms for the Syrian government, since it already controlled almost the entire territory of the country and had a wide range of much more effective conventional weapons at hand. In other words, there seems to be no motive whatsoever for Syria to use chemical weapons on its territory.

Nevertheless, it is against the backdrop of advances by the Syrian army and progress on the political track that reports on chemical weapons attacks spread in the Western media and at international platforms, accompanied by groundless accusations against Damascus. These irresponsible actions undermine efforts underway in Astana, Sochi and Geneva to achieve an inclusive political settlement in Syria, as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

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Representatives of the US-led coalition to fight ISIS, Russian military experts and OPCW experts confirmed on a number of occasions that terrorist groups, including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, made
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military-grade toxic compounds such as mustard gas and used them in attacks regularly. Chemical weapons attacks took place not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, targeting both the military, including US
and Australian military advisors, and civilians. Moreover, representatives of the US-led coalition have repeatedly found and destroyed chemical weapons manufacturing facilities in Iraq operated by ISIS.
That said, for some reason our Western colleagues tend to forget these incidents and are extremely diligent at that, preferring to focus on the far-fetched chemical attacks by the Syrian army.

Over the past few years, we have been urging our colleagues at the UN Security Council to take measures against the threat of chemical terrorism in the Middle East. But all our appeals and initiatives were blocked by the United States and its allies.

The same happened to the Russian-proposed drafts of UN Security Council resolutions on adjusting the JIM's methods to OPCW standards, as well as our draft decisions of the OPCW Executive Council on improving the FFM. This year alone, Russia submitted a draft resolution on the creation of a new independent investigative mechanisms twice. We also proposed decisions on the immediate dispatch of experts to Douma, Syria, which obliged all countries to provide assistance to the OPCW Mission. We advanced a similar demand last year after the chemical attack in Khan-Sheikhoun. But the United States and its allies not only blocked all of Russia's positive initiatives, but also took outrageous steps that are unacceptable in civilised international relations. By launching missile attacks at the territory of a sovereign state, the United States and its allies have complicated the settlement of existing problems and pushed themselves into a corner. They will not justify these strikes because there is no justification for such actions.

Therefore, here is the most painful question for the Western countries: Are they really interested in conducting a full-scale investigation? Or do they only need a political farce and the adjustment of findings to the verdicts pronounced in Washington, London and Paris?

Despite these unacceptable theatricals by the Western countries, Russia will continue to advocate the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution on the creation of a really independent and professional agency that would work in strict compliance with the OPCW standards. We believe that there is no, nor can there be any alternative to this. The matter concerns an extremely responsible and delicate task of identifying those guilty of chemical weapons crimes.

We will also advance similarly high demands to the operation of the OPCW Mission. The deplorable idea of turning the OPCW's Technical Secretariat, which is comprised of predominantly Western experts, into an attributive mechanism fully controlled by the West does not stand a chance. Any attempt of certain well-known states to legalise the extremely aggressive actions that go beyond the UN Charter will be laid bare. We will not allow a purely technical and so far quite successful multilateral non-proliferation mechanism into yet another politicised instrument of Western pressure on disagreeable governments.

We firmly urge all responsible countries to put a distance between them and this opportunistic idea. All of us should be guided by the interests of the OPCW's unity and integrity. What is needed at this difficult stage is a demonstration of political will and efforts that will not fuel conflicts at the OPCW but will really help strengthen the chemical disarmament and non-proliferation regime to the benefit of all countries.

Let us shake off the negative sentiments that are being forced on us and return to the positive legal framework created by the existing agreements. Any questions can and must be settled on the basis of consensus decisions through comprehensive interstate talks. There is no alternative to this.