

Syria Chemical Weapons Briefing

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What's In Blue

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Tomorrow afternoon (7 May), UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Angela Kane will brief Security Council members on the monthly report (S/2015/295) on the implementation of resolution 2118, which required the verification and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons.

Council members expect that the allegations that the government used chlorine bombs in March and April during clashes with opposition groups over control of Idlib will be raised again during tomorrow's consultations. In light of the US draft resolution, which has so far only been shared among the P5, to set up a process to attribute blame for the use of chlorine bombs, the question of whether and how to establish responsibility for those attacks will likely feature prominently in tomorrow's consultations.

Despite the adoption of resolution 2209 on 6 March, which condemned the use of toxic chemicals such as chlorine and threatened sanctions, fundamental differences remain among Council members on next steps on the chemical weapons track.

Russia insists that the Council cannot attribute blame to Damascus since only the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has the capacity to fully assess the situation. It has vehemently rebutted the findings of the OPCW fact-finding mission regarding previous attacks that concluded chlorine had been used as a weapon in barrel bombs dropped from helicopters. The US and others have pointed out that only the government has aerial capacity. At the adoption of resolution 2209, Russia stated categorically that it did not accept the possible use of sanctions under Chapter VII without an attempt to prove that the allegations are true. Other Council members have observed that this would be a difficult litmus test to meet prior to imposing sanctions since the OPCW fact-finding mission is specifically prohibited from attributing blame.

The US views resolution 2209 as a final warning to Damascus before there are consequences for its use of chlorine bombs. The US arranged a closed Arria-formula meeting on 16 April for Council members to hear first-hand accounts of chemical weapons attacks in Syria, in particular from medical professionals who treated victims of the Idlib attacks. The P3 organised another Arria-formula meeting on 29 April—the annual day of remembrance for victims of chemical warfare—with the head of the Syrian National Coalition, Khaled Khoja, who said Syrians are among those victims and called on the Council to implement its resolutions on chemical weapons and take effective steps to end aerial bombardment.

Following the 16 April meeting, the US said the Council needed an attribution mechanism to determine who carried out the attacks and has moved towards this goal in the last couple of weeks. The US, in consultation with France and the UK, prepared a draft

resolution on the question of attribution and shared it with Russia earlier this week. It seems the draft resolution would request the Secretary-General to create a new mission to establish facts regarding which party or parties are responsible for the use of chlorine bombs and report back to the Council. However, it seems it does not pursue other follow-up measures, such as the sanctions threatened in resolutions 2118 and 2209. At press time, it was unclear whether there was agreement between Russia and the US on this draft and it had not yet been circulated to the broader Council membership.

Keeping in mind the possibility of some Council action on this issue, members will also want an update on the activities of the OPCW fact-finding mission on the use of chlorine bombs in Syria since the report under consideration tomorrow provided scant information. It reported that the fact-finding mission is awaiting clearance from Syrian authorities to investigate the government's December 2014 claim that rebels had used chlorine in several incidents and that it is investigating "all available information" regarding the Idlib allegations. In particular, Council members will want to know whether the fact-finding mission will be allowed to enter Syria and, if so, to investigate which claims. Members will also be interested in how the fact-finding mission is carrying out its investigation of the Idlib attacks without access to the sites. Finally, Council members will likely want an estimated time-line of when any findings of the OPCW fact-finding mission may reach the Council and what, if any, linkages there might be with a potential mission by the Secretary-General on the same issue if the draft resolution is adopted.

Regarding the work of the OPCW to implement resolution 2118, the report Kane will present tomorrow states that four chemical weapons production facilities have been destroyed and the planning for the destruction of the remaining structures is underway. Given that the destruction activity is proceeding smoothly, many Council members would want Kane to focus her briefing tomorrow on the work of the OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team and that team's continued discovery of gaps in Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile. It seems some of these Council members have found the level of detail provided on this issue in past briefings to be disappointing and perhaps too deferential to the Syrian government. Other Council members are sympathetic to the delicate balance that the UN must maintain to secure cooperation from the government.

Looking ahead, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos will brief the Council on 28 May. On the political track, Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura began UN-facilitated shuttle diplomacy in Geneva on 4 May. Some Council members may be interested in getting an update from de Mistura this month on these consultations with Syrian and regional actors.

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