

WITH REMOVAL OF MATERIALS UNDER CW AGREEMENT NEARLY COMPLETE, CONCERN IN SYRIA OVER CHLORINE USE

Yesterday, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons noted another delivery of materials by Syria under the agreement calling for Syrian chemical weapons-related materials to be destroyed. Tuesday's delivery took the current totals to 86.5% of all materials to be removed and 88.7% of the Priority 1, or most dangerous, chemicals. That leaves only "two or three" more deliveries to complete removal of all of the materials that Syria declared under the agreement and appears to have Syria on track to meet the current goal of all materials being removed later this month and destroyed by the end of June.

But, because this is Syria, significant controversy continues to swirl. The latest issue centers on the likely use of chlorine gas. That chlorine has been used seems fairly certain, but each side in the conflict accuses the other of being the perpetrator. It should be noted from the outset that chlorine is a widely used material with many peaceful uses and is not covered by the agreement under which Syria gave up its chemical weapons. It was used by Germany in WWI, but more effective chemical agents have since taken its place.

One central question on whether it is Assad's forces who used the chlorine hinges on whether it can be shown that the gas was released from helicopters or airplanes, since the rebel forces have no air capabilities. Numerous news outlets quote anonymous US officials suggesting that chlorine has been delivered by aircraft, but no

proof has been offered (nor has Syria provided proof that the rebels are responsible for the chlorine).

Today's New York Times article is typical of the anonymous accusations against Syria:

Nearly 90 percent of the chemicals in Syria's arsenal have now been exported and only a few shipments remain, international monitors reported Tuesday, but the progress was overshadowed by growing concerns that the Syrian military may be dropping bombs filled with chlorine, a common industrial compound not on the list of prohibited poisons.

Disarmament experts said that if the unconfirmed reports that Syrian warplanes and helicopters have been using chlorine-filled bombs in the civil war were true, that would be a violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention treaty signed by Syria last year and could constitute a war crime.

But CNN went much further in the accusations against Syria on Monday:

The Obama administration and its allies believe the Syrian government may have used chlorine gas in a deadly attack this month on its own people, several U.S. officials and other diplomats told CNN.

The alleged assault that killed at least two and affected dozens of others occurred in the village of Kafr Zeita, a rebel-held area.

While there is no firm proof as the matter is being looked into, several U.S. officials and Western diplomats say the United States believes the regime of Bashar al-Assad is responsible because it has such chemicals and the means to

deliver them.

“Our assessment is it is, at a minimum, concentrated chlorine dropped from helicopters,” a U.S. official said. “That could only be the regime.”

The official did not speak for full attribution.

As usual for accusations in Syria, attention is turning to video posted to YouTube. Today, one focus is on a chlorine canister attached to a detonator. The chlorine canister appears to have come from China:

China’s foreign ministry said on Wednesday that it was investigating reports that a chlorine canister bearing the name of the country’s biggest arms maker was shown in footage believed to document a gas attack in Syria this month.

Attacks this month in several areas in Syria share characteristics that have led analysts to believe that there is a coordinated chlorine bomb campaign, with growing evidence that it is the government side dropping the weapons.

In the rebel-held village of Kfar Zeita in the central province of Hama, 125 miles north of Damascus, opposition activists uploaded video of people choking and being fed oxygen following what they said were bombs dropped from helicopters on April 11 and 12.

Further footage showed a partially exploded canister with the chemical symbol for chlorine along with the name of Chinese arms manufacturer Norinco.

But Reuters then goes on to note the danger of YouTube analysis for assigning blame in the war:

Reuters could not verify the

authenticity of the videos and Norinco, also known as China North Industries Group Corporation, has not responded to requests from Reuters for comment.

The use of chlorine in these attacks is a clear war crime. With the battle in Syria still essentially a stalemate wherein Syria has regained at least some lost ground, each side stands to benefit from the other being found to be guilty of chlorine use. Because of this, all evidence presented must be evaluated carefully to guard against falsification.

Understandably, China's Foreign Ministry urged Reuters not to jump to any conclusions regarding the chlorine canister:

In a statement later emailed to Reuters, the ministry said China "scrupulously abides by its non-proliferation obligations" and strictly controls exports of dual-use items, including sensitive chemicals.

"Chlorine is a raw material that has wide industrial uses, and it is not on any nation's or organization's list of controlled items," it said.

"China hopes that relevant media can objectively and fairly report this, to avoid causing misunderstanding."

With Bandar now apparently out of the picture, but his MANPADS likely in it, Syria remains a point of significant international focus amid calls for extended US training of rebels and continuing reports of infighting among the varying Islamist factions in the rebel groups.

Meanwhile, Syrian citizens continue to suffer, with shelter destroyed and food scarce.