

REUTERS ALLOWS ANONYMOUS “DIPLOMATS” TO BLAME SYRIA FOR DELAYS MOSTLY US’ FAULT

Yesterday, Reuters granted anonymity to “sources”, including two who are each identified as “a senior Western diplomat”, to blame Syria for delays in shipping its chemical weapons-related materials out of the country. Only when we get to the very last paragraph of the article, though, do we get to the fact that these chemicals are to be destroyed aboard the Cape Ray, a ship which the US has outfitted with equipment for destroying the chemicals at sea. The article does note that the Cape Ray is now in transit to the region, but it fails to note that even though the original plan was for the Cape Ray to begin its work by the end of December, the ship did not leave the US until January 27. Allowing for transit time to get to the region, it would appear that the US delay in supplying the Cape Ray can account for the bulk of the 6-8 weeks by which Syria is reported to be behind schedule.

The anonymous smears hit paydirt, prompting Laura Rozen to wonder whether the delay would force the US into taking “kinetic action”. Fortunately, Cheryl Rofer saw through the ruse immediately, calling out the reliance on anonymous diplomats and cautioning that the situation falls far short of anything requiring such a response.

Before getting to the accusations transcribed by Reuters, it is important to go back to what we knew in early December when the plan for destroying the chemicals at sea was first announced. In my post about that development, I had this quote from a BBC article:

It is believed that the chemicals, all but 30 tonnes of which take the form of precursors – two or more of which have to be mixed to create the lethal agents – have been gathered in several marshalling areas by the Syrian army and amount to more than 600 tonnes. The other 30 tonnes consist of mustard gas.

This is very important context that is entirely lacking in the Reuters article: by early December, we knew that Syria had already gathered the key materials into “marshalling areas” where they were being held prior to destruction. Also missing from the Reuters report is that back in early November, Syria completed destroying all of the equipment that can be used for mixing binary chemical weapon agents and loading them into shells for firing. Note, too, that only about 30 tons of the material is intact active chemical agent rather than materials that have to be mixed to produce the agents.

Reuters opens:

Syria has given up less than 5 percent of its chemical weapons arsenal and will miss next week’s deadline to send all toxic agents abroad for destruction, sources familiar with the matter said on Wednesday.

The deliveries, in two shipments this month to the northern Syrian port of Latakia, totaled 4.1 percent of the roughly 1,300 tonnes of toxic agents reported by Damascus to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), said the sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

“It’s not enough and there is no sign of more,” one source briefed on the situation said.

What we see here is blame on Syria for the delay

in removing the materials from the country. There is no explanation that the Cape Ray is more than a month late showing up or that other countries have been extremely reluctant to accept the materials for destruction or even while waiting for the Cape Ray to take the materials. Also note that the amount of material that has been brought to the port is quite likely to include all of the intact chemical weapons material that is known to exist: 4.1 per cent of 1300 tons comes to 57.4 tons, well over the projected 30 tons of intact agents believed to exist.

Look at the blame only being placed on Syria:

A senior Western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the U.N. Security Council will be briefed on the issue by mission head Sigrid Kaag next week.

"All the indications are, and the secretary-general's report makes clear, that actually the regime has been sort of stalling on the implementation of the agreement," the diplomat said.

"It will be important what Sigrid Kaag says about whether she thinks these delays are deliberately politically motivated and why or whether there's any truth in the weather, the security and those more technical aspects," he said.

I suppose that the fact that the Cape Ray has not been available could be included in the anonymous diplomat's mention of "technical aspects", but what did he really think Syria should do while waiting for the ship to arrive? We have seen this process of granting anonymity to diplomats to bash Iran on its nuclear technology, but there has been significant movement lately away from that practice. It would appear that Reuters has failed to apply the Iran lesson to Syria and has failed to provide even the most basic context to the

accusations it has transcribed.

It seems perfectly understandable that Syria would wait for the Cape Ray to be in the region before moving the bulk of the materials to port for shipping to the Cape Ray or other holding areas. Blaming Syria for a delay in when the Cape Ray became available is outrageous. There is more than enough evidence to blame Syria for atrocities in blocking aid to refugee camps and shelling civilian regions, but at least on the chemical weapons front it appears that their behavior has been in line with what would be expected for a party taking responsibility for safe destruction of the materials.

Update: US Ambassador Robert Mikulak has released a statement blaming Syria for the delay and accepting no blame for the Cape Ray showing up later than promised.