

UN Weapons Inspectors Return to Syria

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By BEN HUBBARD and ALAN COWELL

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United Nations inspectors returned to Syria on Wednesday to pursue further investigations into claims of chemical weapons in the civil war after an earlier trip during which they discovered the use of the nerve agent sarin.

The Syrian authorities' chemical weapons stocks are at the center of feverish diplomacy involving primarily the United States and Russia at the United Nations to place toxic agents under international supervision as a prelude to their destruction.

The inspectors arrived in the Syrian capital, Damascus, after first landing in Beirut, the capital of neighboring Lebanon, news reports and officials said.

United Nations officials said the inspectors' second mission to Syria would complete their investigation into "pending credible allegations" of chemical weapons use, The Associated Press reported. In a statement on Tuesday, the United Nations said the inspectors would focus on an attack on March 19 on the village of Khan al Assal outside the northern city of Aleppo, which the rebels captured in July, The A.P. said.

In a report delivered to the United Nations last week on their first visit to Syria in late August, the inspectors had been charged with discovering whether chemical weapons had been used in an attack on Aug. 21 in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, an area long infiltrated by rebels.

Western nations accuse the Syrian authorities of using the chemical weapons in the attack, which killed hundreds. But President Bashar al-Assad has said the rebels seeking to unseat him were responsible.

The inspectors concluded that "chemical weapons have been used in the ongoing conflict between the parties in the Syrian Arab Republic, also against civilians, including children, on a relatively large scale."

The weapons inspectors, who visited Ghouta and left the country with large

amounts of evidence on Aug. 31, said, “In particular, the environmental, chemical and medical samples we have collected provide clear and convincing evidence that surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve agent sarin were used.”

Two days before the report was released, Syria officially agreed to join the international convention on banning chemical weapons, and the United States and Russia, frequently at loggerheads over Syria’s civil war, agreed on a plan to identify and purge those weapons from the country by the middle of next year. Syria has said it would abide by that plan.

In their first report, the inspectors said that the remnants of a warhead they had found showed its capacity of sarin to be about 56 liters — far higher than initially thought. They also said that falling temperatures at the time of the attack ensured that the poison gas, heavier than air, would hug the ground, penetrating lower levels of buildings “where many people were seeking shelter.”

Syria has since made an initial declaration of its chemical weapons program to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a watchdog group known as the O.P.C.W. that oversees the international agreement banning poison gas.

At the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday, President Obama said in a speech that the world body must make sure that Syria sticks to its promises.

“There must be a strong Security Council Resolution to verify that the Assad regime is keeping its commitments, and there must be consequences if they fail to do so,” Mr. Obama said. “If we cannot agree even on this, then it will show that the U.N. is incapable of enforcing the most basic of international laws. On the other hand, if we succeed, it will send a powerful message that the use of chemical weapons has no place in the 21st century, and that this body means what it says.”