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Questions Plague UN Syria Report. Who was behind the East Ghouta Chemical Weapons Attack?

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A senior United Nations official who deals directly with Syrian affairs has told *Al-Akhbar* that the Syrian government had no involvement in the alleged Ghouta chemical weapons attack: "Of course not, he (President Bashar al-Assad) would be committing suicide."

When asked who he believed was responsible for the use of chemical munitions in Ghouta, the UN official, who would not permit disclosure of his identity, said: **"Saudi intelligence was behind the attacks and unfortunately nobody will dare say that."** The official claims that this information was provided by rebels in Ghouta.

A report by the UN Mission to investigate use of chemical weapons (CW) in Ghouta, Syria was released last Monday, but per its mandate, did not assign blame to either the Syrian government or opposition rebels.

Media commentators and officials from several western countries, however, have strongly suggested that the Syrian government is the likely perpetrator of CW attacks in Ghouta and other locations.

But on Sunday, veteran Mideast journalist for The Independent Robert Fisk also reported that "grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad's army."

The UN official's accusations mirror statements made earlier this year by another senior UN figure Carla del Ponte, who last May told Swiss TV in the aftermath of alleged CW attacks in Khan al-Asal, Sheik Maqsood and Saraqeb that there were "strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof," that rebels had carried out the attack. Del Ponte also observed that UN inspectors had seen no evidence of the Syrian army using chemical weapons, but added that further investigation was necessary.

The UN Inquiry tasked with investigating chemical weapons use in Syria hastily dismissed del Ponte's comments by saying it had "not reached conclusive findings" as to the use of CWs by any parties.

So why then are we getting these contradictory leaks by top UN officials?

The recently released UN Report on CW use in Syria may provide some clues. While it specifically does not assign blame for the use of CWs to either side, its disclosures and exclusions very clearly favor a rebel narrative of the Ghouta attacks. And that may be

prompting these leaks from insiders who have access to a broader view of events.

Startling environmental evidence

The UN investigations focus on three main areas of evidence: environmental sampling, human sampling and munitions forensics.

The most stunning example of the UN's misrepresentation of facts inside Ghouta is displayed in its findings on environmental samples tested for traces of Sarin nerve gas.

On page 4 of the Report, the UN clearly states that environmental "samples were taken from impact sites and surrounding areas" and that "according to the reports received from the OPCW-designated laboratories, the presence of Sarin, its degradation and/or production by-products were observed in a majority of the samples."

The UN team gathered environmental samples from two areas in Ghouta: Moadamiyah in West Ghouta, and Ein Tarma and Zamalka in East Ghouta. The Moadamiyah samples were collected on August 26 when the UN team spent a total of two hours in the area. The Ein Tarma and Zamalka samples were collected on August 28 and 29 over a total time period of five and a half hours.

The UN investigators specify those dates in Appendix 6 of the Report.

But in Appendix 7, an entirely different story emerges about the results of environmental testing in Ghouta. This section of the Report is filled with charts that do not specify the towns where environmental samples were collected – just dates, codes assigned to the samples, description of the samples and then the CW testing results from two separate laboratories.

Instead, a closer look at the charts shows a massive discrepancy in lab results from east and west Ghouta. *There is not a single environmental sample in Moadamiyah that tested positive for Sarin.*

This is a critical piece of information. These samples were taken from "impact sites and surrounding areas" identified by numerous parties, not just random areas in the town. Furthermore, in Moadamiyah, the environmental samples were taken five days after the reported CW attack, whereas in Ein Tarma and Zamalka – where many samples tested positive for Sarin – UN investigators collected those samples seven and eight days post-attack, when degradation of chemical agents could have been more pronounced.

Yet it is in Moadamiyah where alleged victims of a CW attack tested highest for Sarin exposure, with a positive result of 93% and 100% (the discrepancy in those numbers is due to different labs testing the same samples). In Zamalka, the results were 85% and 91%.

It is scientifically improbable that survivors would test that highly for exposure to Sarin without a single trace of environmental evidence testing positive for the chemical agent.

I spoke with Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, former commander of the British military's chemical defense regiment and CEO at CW specialists, SecureBio Ltd. "I think that is strange," he admits, when told about the stark discrepancy between human and environmental test results in Moadamiyah.

“It could be significant. Nobody else has brought that point up,” says Bretton-Gordon, who has read the UN Report closely since he actually trains doctors and first-responders in Ghouta via an NGO.

> “I think that it is strange that the environmental and human samples don’t match up. This could be because there have been lots of people trampling through the area and moving things. Unless the patients were brought in from other areas. There doesn’t seem another plausible explanation.”

Bretton-Gordon notes that while Sarin’s “toxicity” lasts only between 30-60 minutes when humans are directly exposed, it can remain toxic for many days on clothes (which is why medical workers wear protective gear) and lasts for months, sometimes years in the environment.

Why did the UN not highlight this very troubling result of its own investigations? The data had to be included in the Report since the two samplings – human and environmental – were core evidentiary components of the investigation. But it is buried in the small print of the Report – an inconvenient contradiction that was dismissed by the UN team. If anything, the UN blatantly claims on page 5 of its findings:

> “The environmental, chemical and medical samples we have collected provide clear and compelling evidence that surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve agent Sarin were used in Ein Tarma, Moadamiyah and Zamalka in the Ghouta area of Damascus.”

There are several logical conclusions for the lack of environmental evidence and the abundance of human evidence of Sarin exposure in Moadamiyah:

One is that there was no Sarin CW attack in Moadamiyah. There can’t have been – according to this environmental data. A second explanation is that the samples from Moadamiyah were contaminated somehow, even though the human samplings showed no sign of this. This is an unlikely explanation since the UN went to great pains, explained in depth in several sections of the Report, to ensure the sanctity of the evidence collected.

A third explanation, mentioned by Bretton-Gordon, is that patients might have been “brought in from other areas.” All the patients were pre-selected by Ghouta doctors and opposition groups for presentation to the UN teams. And if this is the only plausible explanation for the discrepancy between environmental and human test results, then it suggests that “patients” were “inserted” into Moadamiyah, possibly to create a narrative of a chemical weapons attack that never took place.

This would almost certainly imply that opposition groups were involved in staging events in Ghouta. These towns are in rebel-controlled areas that have been involved in heavy battle with the Syrian government for much of the conflict. There is no army or government presence in these Ghouta areas whatsoever.

Human Testing

The UN team’s selection of survivors in Moadamiyah and Zamalka raises even more questions. Says the Report:

> "A leader of the local opposition forces who was deemed prominent in the area to be visited by the Mission, was identified and requested to take 'custody' of the Mission. The point of contact within the opposition was used to ensure the security and movement of the Mission, to facilitate the access to the most critical cases/witnesses to be interviewed and sampled by the Mission and to control patients and crowd in order for the Mission to focus to its main activities."

In short, opposition groups in these entirely rebel-held areas exercised considerable influence over the UN's movements and access during the entire seven and a half hours spent gathering evidence. The Report continues:

> "A prominent local medical doctor was identified. This medical doctor was used to help in preparing for the arrival of the Mission… Concerning the patients, a sufficient number was requested to be presented to the Mission, in order for the Mission to pick a subpopulation for interviews and sampling. Typically a list of screening questions was also circulated to the opposition contacts. This included the queries to help in identification of the most relevant cases."

To be clear, doctors and medical staff working in rebel-held areas are understood to be sympathetic to the opposition cause. Shelled almost daily by the Syrian army, you will not find pro-government staff manning hospitals in these hotly contested towns. Bretton-Gordon, who trains some of the medical staff in Ghouta, acknowledges that this bias is "one of the weaknesses" of evidence compilation in this area.

> "We've been helping doctors on the opposition side, so they tend to tell you things they want you to hear."

The entire population of patients to be examined by the UN team were essentially selected and delivered to the inspection team by the opposition in Ghouta. This, of course, includes the 44% of "survivors" allegedly from Moadamiyah.

In a report on Thursday, American CW expert Dan Kaszeta raised further questions. While concluding that Sarin was used in Ghouta based on "environmental and medical evidence" produced by the UN team, Kaszeta notes that testing only 36 survivors "cannot conceivably be considered a scientifically or statistically accurate sample of the population of affected victims. It would be considered scientifically unsound to draw widespread conclusions based simply on this sample."

Kaszeta also points out that the survivors' "exact presentation of signs and symptoms seems skewed from our conventional understanding of nerve agent exposure." He gives as example the relative lack of Miosis – "the threshold symptom for nerve agent exposure" – in Ghouta patients, which was found in only 15% of those tested compared to 99% of survivors in the 1995 Tokyo Sarin attack.

Other patient indications that appear out of proportion to Kaszeta were those who experienced convulsions (an advanced symptom) but did not concurrently display milder ones like excess salivation, excess tearing or miosis. "That is very strange to me," says Kaszeta.

"Generally, loss of consciousness is considered to be a very grave sign in nerve agent

poisoning, happening shortly before death. How is it 78% of the patients had lost consciousness?" he asks.

> "Is it possible that we are looking at exposure to multiple causes of injury? Were some of the examined victims exposed to other things in addition to Sarin? I am not stating that Sarin was not used. It clearly was. My point is that it is either not behaving as we have understood it in the past or that other factors were at work in addition to Sarin."

Munitions "Evidence"

Although the highest rate of Sarin-exposure was found in Moadamiyah "survivors," the UN team found no traces of Sarin on the 140mm rocket identified as the source of the alleged CW attack – or in its immediate environment.

Moving to an adjacent apartment building where the initial debris from rocket impact was found: "the Mission was told that the inhabitants of this location were also injured or killed by a 'gas.'" There was no evidence of Sarin there either.

The Report also notes: "The sites have been well-travelled by other individuals both before and during the investigation. Fragments and other evidence have clearly been handled/moved prior to the arrival of the investigation team."

That theme continues in both Ein Tarma and Zamalka where UN inspectors observed:

> "As with other sites, the locations have been well traveled by other individuals prior to the arrival of the Mission. During the time spent at these locations, individuals arrived carrying other suspected munitions indicating that such potential evidence is being moved and possibly manipulated."

While Sarin traces were found on munitions in the latter two locations, the UN Report cannot identify the location from which these munitions were fired. The team studied five "impact sites" in total, only two of which provide "sufficient evidence to determine the likely trajectory of the projectiles."

These two sites are in Moadamiyah (Site 1), where an 140mm M14 artillery rocket was investigated, and in Ein Tarma (Site 4), where a "mystery" 330mm artillery rocket was identified as the source of the CW attack.

The flight path (trajectory) of these munitions provided in the UN Report may be more or less accurate, but less so is the *distance they traveled*, for which the UN offers no estimates whatsoever. And in a large "range" area criss-crossed by pro-government and pro-opposition areas, both sets of data are critical in determining the source of the alleged attacks.

Maps currently being disseminated by the media that claim to identify the point of origin of the projectiles, are misleading. I spoke with Eliot Higgins, whose Brown Moses blog has kept a running video inventory and analysis of munitions used in the Syrian conflict and who has worked closely with Human Rights Watch (HRW), which produced one of these maps:

> "Munitions have a minimum range as well as a maximum range so it gives you a zone of where they can be fired from. Problem with the mystery rocket (in Ein Tarma) is that data doesn't exist so it's harder to be sure. You can show the trajectories and if they intersect, it might suggest a common point of origin. While the M14 has a range of just under 10km, the other munition is harder to figure out, there's a lot of factors, not least the type of fuel. And it's impossible to know the type of fuel short of finding an unfired one."

In short, the only one of the two munitions whose range we know is the one from Moadamiyah, which has an estimated range of between 3.8 and 9.8 kilometers, was not found to have traces of Sarin, and is therefore not part of any alleged CW attack.

On the map produced by HRW – which points specifically to the Syrian army's Republican Guard 104th Brigade base as the likely point of origin – the distance from Moadamiyah to the base is 9.5km. But since this now appears to be a munition used in conventional battle, it can't even legitimately be used by HRW in their efforts to identify an intersecting point of origin for CWs. It could have come from the military base, but so what?

The HRW map draws another line based on the trajectory of the Ein Tarma munition (the one with Sarin traces) to this Republican Guard base (9.6km), but we have *no evidence at all* of the range of this rocket. Its large size, however, suggests a range *beyond* the 9.8km of the smaller projectile which could take it well past the military base into rebel-held territory.

HRW has very simplistically assembled a map that follows the known trajectories of both munitions and marked X at a convenient point of origin that would place blame for CW attacks on the Syrian government.

It doesn't at all investigate any evidence that the rockets could have come from more than one point of origin, and skirts over the fact that HRW doesn't even know the distance travelled by either missile. As Higgins says: "the best you can do with the mystery munition is draw a straight line and see where it goes."

But western media ran with HRW's extrapolations, without looking at the *evidence*. *"This isn't conclusive, given the limited data available to the UN team, but it is highly suggestive,"* says the HRW report. Not really. The case for culpability will need much tighter evidence than the facile doodling on this HRW map.

CWs were used, but by whom and how?

The discrepancies in the story of the Ghouta CW attacks are vast. Casualty figures range from a more modest 300+ to the more dramatic 1,400+ figures touted by western governments. The UN investigators were not able to confirm any of these numbers – they only saw 80 survivors and tested only 36 of these. They saw none of the dead – neither in graves nor in morgues.

While media headlines tend to blame CW attacks on the Syrian government – and US Secretary of State John Kerry now flat-out states it – on August 21 there existed little motive that would explain why the army would sabotage its military gains and invite foreign intervention for crossing CW "red lines."

If anything, the more obvious motive would be for retreating rebels to manufacture a CW false flag operation to elicit the kind of western-backed military response needed to alter

the balance of force on the ground in favor of oppositionists. Which as we all know, almost happened with a US strike.

Clearly, further investigation is needed to put together all these contradictory pieces of the Ghouta puzzle. And for that you need an impartial team of investigators who have complete access to *randomly sampled* witnesses, patients, impact areas, their surroundings and beyond. More importantly, you need *time* to conduct a thorough investigation.

It should be noted here that during the UN team's visit to Moadamiyah on August 26, unknown snipers in the rebel-held area fired at the UN Mission, further limiting their *time* in the area for investigation.

This UN Report raises more questions than it answers. The entire population it interviewed – witnesses, patients, doctors – share a bias toward rebels. Almost all were pre-selected by the opposition and presented to the UN team for a *rushed* investigation. The munitions forensics provide little evidence as to their point of origin, which is critical to determine culpability. The human and environmental testing are inconclusive in that they don't provide enough information to help us determine what happened – and even suggest tampering and staging. Why would evidence need to be manufactured if this was a chemical weapons attack on a grand scale?

At the end of the day, the UN Report does not tell us *who*, *how* or *what* happened in Ghouta on August 21. As the team prepares to head into Khan al-Asal for further investigations, one hopes that they will learn from these shortcomings and provide the conclusive findings needed to assign blame for war crimes. These missions are not merely an exercise. While the UN itself may not be allowed to point a finger at either side in this conflict, they must produce water-tight forensic conclusions that help the international community reach a decisive verdict based on *evidence*.

And all these leaks from UN officials will dissipate the moment there is internal confidence that the job is being done properly.

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