



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 6, 2013

UN Investigator Claims Evidence Syrian Rebels Used Sarin Gas

The “varying degrees of confidence” the Obama administration has claimed for intelligence reports of chemical weapons use by government forces in Syria may become more varied and less confident if evidence cited by a United Nations investigator is substantiated. Reuters [reported](#) from Geneva on Sunday that one member of a UN team looking into human rights violations in Syria’s two-year-old civil war said the evidence pointed to use of sarin gas by the rebel forces.



Carla Del Ponte, a former Swiss attorney general and a member of the UN independent commission of inquiry on Syria, said in a Swiss-Italian television interview that the commission’s investigations produced “strong, concrete suspicions” about the origin of the nerve-gas attack.

“Our investigators have been in neighboring countries interviewing victims, doctors and field hospitals and, according to their report of last week which I have seen, there are strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof of the use of Sarin gas, from the way the victims were treated,” Del Ponte said. “This was use on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities,” she added.

Del Ponte, who served as prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, gave no details as to when or where sarin may have been used, Reuters reported. The Geneva-based inquiry into war crimes and human rights violations is separate from the investigation authorized by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon into allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria.

President Bashar al-Assad’s government and the rebels have accused each other of carrying out three chemical weapon attacks, one near Aleppo and another near Damascus, both in March, and another in Homs in December. Based on a recent White House confirmation of intelligence reports “with varying degrees of confidence” that the attacks were made by government forces, members of Congress have been calling on President Obama to act in accord with statements he had made that the use of such weapons would cross a “red line” with consequences for the Assad regime. Sen. John McCain has been most vocal in criticizing the president’s inaction. The Arizona Republican as recently as Sunday was again calling for the United States to impose a no-fly zone against the Syrian Air Force, a safe zone for the rebels at the Turkey-Syrian border, and the arming of the opposition forces.

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said last week that arming the rebels is an option being considered by the administration. “We are continually evaluating the situation on the ground,” Obama said Wednesday during a news conference in Mexico City. “We want to make sure that we look before we leap and that what we’re doing is actually helpful to the situation.”

In disclosing the intelligence reports in an April 25 letter to McCain and Senate Armed Services Committee chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.), White House legislative affairs director Miguel E. Rodriguez



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hinted the attacks might have come from the rebel forces that had seized control of sarin gas, noting “the chain of custody is not clear so we cannot affirm how the exposure occurred or under what conditions.” The administration would need to “build on these intelligence assessments as we seek to establish credible and corroborated facts,” he wrote. In apparent reference to false reports of “weapons of mass destruction” that fueled support for the Iraq War, Rodriguez cautioned: “Given the stakes involved, and what we have learned from our own recent experience, intelligence assessments alone are not sufficient — only credible and corroborated facts that provide us with some degree of certainty will guide our decision-making and strengthen our leadership of the international community.”

McCain, who dismissed that “caveat” as an excuse for inaction, was among the leading “hawks” in favor of the Iraq War. He also pressed for the increase, or “surge” of U.S. forces there that helped prevent a takeover by rebel forces in that country of the government established under the auspices of U.S. and coalition forces that carried out the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime. McCain has said repeatedly that he is not calling for “boots on the ground” in Syria, but for arming the rebel forces, and for using unmanned aircraft, along with cruise and Patriot missiles to destroy Syrian aircraft on the ground and defend the safe zone. That should be enough to “tip the scales” in favor of the Syrian rebels, he [said](#).

U.S. troops establishing a safe zone at or near the Syrian border could easily be fired upon by Assad forces, drawing the United States into another civil war in the Arab world. And arming the rebels could easily backfire, since the Syrian opposition is dominated by radical anti-American forces. The leading faction in the coalition fighting the Assad regime is the [al-Nusra Front](#), an Islamic group that fought American forces in Iraq and last month announced its formal union with al-Qaeda in “the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.”

U.S. efforts to “tip the scales” in favor of the overthrow of the Assad regime could turn out to be as “successful” as the much heralded “regime change” in Iraq. The nation might well wonder if we can afford more “success” of that kind.

Photo of a U.S. Patriot missile battery



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