

UN says US-backed opposition, not Syrian regime, used poison gas

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In a series of interviews, UN investigator Carla del Ponte said that sarin gas used in Syria was fired by the US-backed opposition, not the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Her account explodes the lies on which Washington and its European allies have based their campaign for war with Syria, according to which the US and its allies are preparing to attack Syria to protect its people from Assad's chemical weapons. In fact, available evidence of sarin use implicates the Islamist-dominated "rebels" who are armed by US-allied Middle Eastern countries, under CIA supervision.

Del Ponte's statements coincide with the flagrantly illegal Israeli air strikes on Syria, which have been endorsed by President Obama. These acts of war mark a major escalation of the US-instigated and supported sectarian war for regime-change in Syria, itself a preparation for attacks on the Syrian regime's main ally in the region, Iran.

Del Ponte is a former Swiss attorney general who served on Western-backed international courts on Yugoslavia and Rwanda. She currently sits on a UN commission of inquiry on Syria. In an interview with Italian-Swiss broadcaster RSI on Sunday, she said, "According to the testimonies we have gathered, the rebels have used chemical weapons, making use of sarin gas."

She explained, "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. This was on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities."

She added, "This is not surprising, since the opponents [i.e., the anti-Assad opposition] have been infiltrated by foreign fighters."

In a video interview on the BBC yesterday, del Ponte said, "We collected some witness testimony that made it appear that some chemical weapons were used, in particular, nerve gas. What appeared to our investigation was that was used by the opponents, by the rebels. We have no, no indication at all that the government, the authorities of the Syrian

government, had used chemical weapons."

These statements expose the US campaign over chemical weapons in Syria as a series of lies, concocted to justify another war of aggression in the Middle East. The campaign began in late March, as the US military was announcing plans for stepped-up intervention in Syria, when the Assad regime charged that the opposition had fired a rocket with a chemical warhead at Khan al-Asal, near Aleppo. It killed 26 people, including 16 Syrian soldiers, according to opposition sources.

The opposition responded by alleging that it was the Assad regime that had fired the chemical rocket. This was highly implausible, as the rocket was aimed at pro-Assad forces.

Nonetheless, the US political and media establishment took opposition allegations as good coin, demanding stepped-up intervention in Syria based on Obama's remarks in August of 2012 that use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government would be a "red line" prompting a US attack.

On April 26, the White House endorsed this campaign in a letter to Congress, declaring: "The US intelligence community assesses with some degree of varying confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria."

This statement had no basis in fact and was evidently fabricated by ignoring witness testimony gathered by the UN. Even after Del Ponte's interviews, US officials continued to make inflammatory statements implying that Assad is using chemical weapons. An Obama administration advisor told the *New York Times* yesterday, "It's become pretty clear to everyone that Assad is calculating whether those weapons might save him."

The use of sarin by the US-backed Sunni Islamist opposition, which is tied to Al Qaeda and routinely carries out terror attacks inside Syria, also raises the question of how it obtained the poison gas. The US Council on Foreign Relations describes sarin as "very complex and dangerous to make," though it can be made "by a trained chemist with publicly available chemicals."

Whether the Islamists received sarin from their foreign

backers, synthesized it themselves possibly under outside supervision, or stole it from Syrian stockpiles, its use makes clear the reckless and criminal character of US backing for the Islamist opposition.

Throughout the Syrian war, the American state and media have operated on the assumption that the public could be manipulated and fed the most outrageous lies. Whether these lies were even vaguely plausible did not matter, because the media could be relied upon to spin them to justify deepening the attack on Syria.

Time and again—in the Houla massacre of May 2012 and the murder of journalist Gilles Jacquier in January 2012—the media blamed atrocities perpetrated by the opposition on the Assad regime, then dropped the issue when it emerged that the opposition was responsible. Even the US government’s announcement last December that Al Qaeda-linked opposition forces had carried out hundreds of terror bombings in Syria did not dim media support for the war.

Now the US media are burying news of del Ponte’s interview, as Washington moves towards direct intervention in Syria. Her interview was not mentioned in any of the three major network evening news programs yesterday.

Instead, after the Israeli air strikes against Syrian targets on Thursday and Sunday, US officials and media pundits boasted that US forces could attack Syrian air defenses with few casualties. (See: “The Israeli strikes on Syria”).

Reprising the lies about weapons of mass destruction (WMD) used to justify the war against Iraq, the US ruling elite is placing chemical weapons at the center of its war propaganda on Syria. Yesterday, the *Washington Post* wrote: “Israeli strikes—following reports in recent weeks that Assad’s forces probably deployed chemical weapons in unknown quantities—appeared to bolster the case of those who have long favored direct US support for the rebels.”

The *New York Times* noted that Obama might use chemical weapons as pretext for war if he attacked without UN Security Council authorization. It wrote: “Russia would almost certainly veto any effort to obtain UN Security Council authorization to take military action. So far, Mr. Obama has avoided seeking such authorization, and that is one reason that past or future use of chemical weapons could serve as a legal argument for conducting strikes.”

The newspaper did not remark that, in such a case, Obama’s war against Syria would be just as illegal from the standpoint of international law as Bush’s invasion of Iraq ten years ago. That war, which cost over a million Iraqi lives and tens of thousands of US casualties, as well as trillions of dollars, is deeply hated in the American and international working class.

The American ruling elite’s need to downplay the war in Iraq as it prepares to launch a similar bloodbath in Syria

underlay the *New York Times* column penned yesterday by the *Times*’ former executive editor, Bill Keller, entitled “Syria Is Not Iraq.” Lamenting that the experience of the Iraq war—which he and the *Times* had promoted with false reports of Iraqi WMD—had left him “gun-shy,” Keller bluntly asserted, “getting Syria right starts with getting over Iraq.”

By “getting over Iraq,” Keller meant overcoming concerns about using military action and mass killing to crush opposition to US policy. He wrote that “in Syria, I fear prudence has become fatalism... our reluctance to arm the rebels or defend the civilians being slaughtered in their homes has convinced the Assad regime (and the world) that we are not serious.”

Claiming that Washington is preparing military plans “in the event that Assad’s use of chemical weapons forces our hand,” he pushed for rapid intervention, writing, “Why wait for the next atrocity?”

Keller’s warmongering column is a particularly clear example of how the media’s promotion of US imperialist policy is divorced from reality. The fact that there is no evidence that Assad has used chemical weapons, or that the next atrocity in Syria will likely be carried out by US-backed forces, is irrelevant to the *Times*. Its concern is to package the next US war, the facts be damned.

The collective intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the media and the ruling elite accounts for the fact that del Ponte’s explosive revelations can be buried without comment. Drunk on its own lying propaganda, desperate to erase the conclusions the population has drawn from Washington’s last bloody debacle, the American ruling class is tobogganing towards a new catastrophe.



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