

Syrian regime, “rebels” trade poison gas charges

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The Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad and US-backed insurgent groups traded charges of unleashing poison gas after an incident Friday in the village of Kfar Zeita, in Hama province, about 200 kilometers north of Damascus.

There was no credible on-the-spot reporting from the village, but media coverage of the Syrian war nonetheless focused attention on the incident, which the hard-pressed “rebels” hoped would provide a pretext for US intervention. The Assad regime has been making significant gains in heavy fighting around the country’s two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, and the fragmented insurgent groups lack both popular support and military advantage.

While the Obama administration used an alleged poison gas attack last August to threaten bombing attacks on Syria, its response to the latest atrocity claim was cautious. UN Ambassador Samantha Power, speaking on an ABC News interview program Sunday, described reports of the use of poison gas as “unsubstantiated.”

She said, “But we’ve shown, I think, in the past that we will do everything in our power to establish what has happened and then consider possible steps in response.” Power was referring both to threats of war and numerous US propaganda efforts to link previous gas attacks to the Syrian government.

Independent reporting on the Syrian civil war indicates that the “rebels,” not the government, have resorted to poison gas, partly to overcome the regime’s advantages in heavy weaponry, but mainly to provide a pretext for imperialist intervention against Assad.

Last week, the veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported that the government of Turkey was likely responsible for last August’s gas attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, citing interviews with

current and former US security officials who said the Turkish regime was seeking to provoke a US attack on Assad. There has been no mention of Hersh’s charge in the US media since then, and there was no reference to it in this weekend’s reporting on the incident at Kfar Zeita.

Online videos showed injured people in the hospital suffering obvious respiratory problems. State-run Syrian television said that chlorine gas killed two people and sickened more than 100, but blamed the attack on the al-Nusra Front “rebel” group, which has links to both Al Qaeda and the CIA.

“Rebel” spokesmen claimed that Syrian government helicopters dropped barrel bombs carrying toxic gas on the village. They also described the gas as resembling chlorine, which has a yellowish color and distinctive odor, but is comparatively inefficient as a weapon of mass destruction.

As in the case of the gas attacks last August, it is the “rebels,” not the regime, who have the clearest motive to use the banned weapons. Forces loyal to Assad are on the offensive, and the Syrian president declared Sunday that the three-year civil war had reached a “turning point” because of these successes.

Speaking at a university in Damascus, Assad said, “[T]here is a turning point in the crisis in Syria in terms of the continuous military achievements...by the army and armed forces in the war against terror,” according to the state news agency SANA.

Syrian government forces and their Lebanese Hezbollah allies have largely closed off border supply routes from Lebanon to “rebel”-held areas in the south and west of the country. The government has also negotiated local truces in a number of districts in and around Damascus, in which beleaguered insurgent units have given up their main weapons in return for the

lifting of sieges.

Fighting around Aleppo was said to be the heaviest in two years, although there were conflicting reports about which side was gaining the advantage. There were indiscriminate attacks on both sides, with regime forces dropping barrel bombs on “rebel”-held neighborhoods and Islamist groups firing artillery shells into government-held neighborhoods.

There was also an explosive “rebel” vs. “rebel” conflict between rival offshoots of Al Qaeda. The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Shams (ISIS), which is seeking to wage a united Islamist war in both Syria and Iraq, attacked positions held by the al-Nusra Front in the city of Abu Kamal, on the Syria-Iraq border. The position is strategic both for its location—it separates ISIS-controlled territory near Raqqa in northern Syria and in Anbar province in western Iraq—and for its control of Syria’s most important oil resources, at Deir Azour.

Reuters reported that a “rebel” force had crossed the Turkish border along the Mediterranean coast, attacking villages around Latakia, the port city which is the heartland of the Alawite minority, from which much of the Assad regime’s leading personnel is drawn. The attack targeted the Armenian Christian village of Kasab, the last crossing point on the 500-mile Syria-Turkish border still controlled by Assad’s forces.

Meanwhile, the United Nations World Food Program warned that Syria faced a record low harvest, with wheat production expected to reach only 2 million tons in 2014, compared to the expected need of 5.1 million tons, in a country that before the civil war was largely self-sufficient in food.

Record low rainfall, less than half the average amount, is a major factor, along with the impact of the fighting, which has forced nine million Syrians, nearly half the population, to flee their homes—with 6.5 million internally displaced and 2.5 million taking refuge in other countries.



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