

Chemical attack kills dozens in Syria, U.S. blames Assad

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Associated Press

BEIRUT — A chemical weapons attack in an opposition-held town in northern Syria killed dozens of people on Tuesday, leaving residents gasping for breath and convulsing in the streets and overcrowded hospitals. The Trump administration blamed the Syrian government for the attack, one of the deadliest in years, and said Syria's patrons, Russia and Iran, bore "great moral responsibility" for the deaths.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 58 people died, including 11 children, in the early morning attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, which witnesses said was carried out by Sukhoi jets operated by the Russian and Syrian governments.

Videos from the scene showed volunteer medics using fire hoses to wash the chemicals from victims' bodies. Haunting images of lifeless children piled in heaps reflected the magnitude of the attack, which was reminiscent of a 2013 chemical assault that left hundreds dead and was the worst in the country's ruinous six-year civil war.

Tuesday's attack drew swift condemnation from world leaders, including President Donald Trump, who denounced it as a "heinous" act that "cannot be ignored by the civilized world." The U.N. Security Council scheduled an emergency meeting for Wednesday in response to the strike, which came on the eve of a major international donors' conference in Brussels on the future of Syria and the region.



This photo provided Tuesday by the Syrian anti-government activist group Edlib Media Center, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, shows victims of a suspected chemical attack, in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, northern Idlib province, Syria.

In a statement, Trump also blamed former President Barack Obama for "weakness" in failing to respond aggressively after the 2013 attack.

"These heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the past administration's weakness and irresolution," Trump said. "President Obama said in 2012 that he would establish a 'red line' against the use of chemical weapons and then did nothing. The United States stands with our allies across the globe to condemn this intolerable attack."

Trump left it to his top diplomat, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, to assign at least some blame to Russia and Iran, Assad's most powerful allies. Tillerson called on both countries to use their influence over

Assad to prevent future chemical weapons attacks, and noted Russia's and Iran's roles in helping broker a cease-fire through diplomatic talks in the Kazakh capital, Astana.

"As the self-proclaimed guarantors to the cease-fire negotiated in Astana, Russia and Iran also bear great moral responsibility for these deaths," Tillerson said.

In a statement, the Syrian government "categorically rejected" claims that it was responsible, asserting that it does not possess chemical weapons, hasn't used them in the past and will not use them in the future. It laid the blame squarely on the rebels, accusing them of fabricating the attack and trying to frame the Syrian government. The Russian Defense Ministry also denied any involvement.

BRIEFLY

McConnell claims votes to bust Supreme Court filibuster

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell claimed the votes Tuesday to bust a planned Democratic filibuster of President Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee as a showdown neared that could change the Senate, and the court, for generations.

"They seem determined to head into the abyss," the Kentucky Republican said of Democrats as debate began over Judge Neil Gorsuch's nomination. "They need to reconsider."

Democrats made clear they had no plans to do so, and blamed Republicans for pushing them to attempt a nearly unheard of filibuster of a well-qualified Supreme Court pick. Forty-four Democrats intend to vote against proceeding to final confirmation on Gorsuch, which would be enough to block him under the Senate's filibuster rules that require 60 votes to proceed.

Oregon Democrat Jeff Merkley began talking on the Senate floor Tuesday evening and said he planned to remain "as long as I am able."

Merkley's extended speech isn't a filibuster and won't delay debate or votes, but it's part of Democrats' effort to bring attention to the nomination.

Merkley was one of the first opponents of President Donald Trump's nominee, citing Republicans' 2016 blockade of former President Barack Obama's pick. Republicans refused to hold hearings or a vote on Merrick Garland.

North Korea fires ballistic missile into its eastern waters

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea fired a ballistic missile into the waters off its east coast on Wednesday, U.S. and South Korean officials said, amid worries that the North might soon conduct banned nuclear or long-range rocket tests.

The firing was also made as North Korea expressed anger over annual military drills between the United States and South Korea that North Korea sees as an invasion rehearsal.

The U.S. Pacific Command said it detected and tracked what it assessed as North Korean missile launched from land near the eastern city of Sinpo. A U.S. statement said initial assessments indicate the type of missile was a KN-15 medium-range ballistic missile. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a similar assessment, saying the missile flew about 37 miles.

That is a much shorter distance than other North Korean missiles flew in their recent test-launches.

Two weeks ago, the South Korean and U.S. militaries said they had detected a failed North Korean ballistic missile launch. South Korean media speculated at the time that North Korea might have attempted to test a missile that it hasn't deployed. Earlier in March, North Korea fired four ballistic missiles that flew about 620 miles, with three of them landing in waters that Japan claims as its exclusive economic zone.

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