

Beat: Business

OPCW chemical weapons inspectors attacked in western Syria

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USPA News - A convoy carrying inspectors from the world's chemical watchdog and United Nations (UN) staff members came under attack Tuesday while en-route to investigate an alleged chlorine gas attack in western Syria, but all staff members were accounted-for, officials said. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is overseeing the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, said its convoy - comprised of both OPCW and UN staff - came under attack while attempting to reach the site of an alleged chlorine gas attack in Hama province.

The Syrian government claimed OPCW inspectors were briefly abducted. "All team members are safe and well and are traveling back to the operating base," Michael Luhan, a spokesman for the chemical watchdog, said in an emailed statement after Tuesday's attack. He did not provide other details about the attack or whether the team would attempt to return at a later date. Earlier, Syria's foreign ministry had released a statement that said one of the mission's cars had been blown up with an explosive device about 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from Taibet al-Imam village. It occurred soon after the Syrian military had informed the joint OPCW-UN team it would be unable to provide protection beyond the village, but the ministry said the team decided to proceed at its own risk. Syrian officials said the team members in the car destroyed by the explosion were moved into another vehicle in the convoy in order to return to the village. However, the officials said, only one of the cars reached the village after the other two vehicles - carrying 5 Syrian drivers and 6 team members in total - were hijacked by "armed terrorist groups," the term it also uses to refer to rebels. In a subsequent report from the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the government claimed the mission members had been released. The OPCW Director-General, Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü, expressed his concern about Tuesday's attack in a brief statement, but provided no further clarification. "Our inspectors are in Syria to establish the facts in relation to persistent allegations of chlorine gas attacks," he said. "Their safety is our primary concern, and it is imperative that all parties to the conflict grant them safe and secure access." Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department, said the United States strongly condemned Tuesday's attack and called on all sides to grant safe, secure, and unfettered access to OPCW and UN staff. "We commend the brave OPCW and UN staff working in Syria during an ongoing war, and we thank them for their continued resolve to ensuring the accomplishment of their vital work," she said. The crisis in Syria began as a pro-democracy protest movement in March 2011, similar to those across the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian government violently cracked down on the protests, setting off an armed conflict between pro-Assad forces and anti-government forces. The United Nations estimates that more than 100,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and millions more have fled to neighboring countries since the start of the uprising that has escalated into a full-blown civil war. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths has already exceeded 200,000, but those figures cannot be independently verified.

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