

Chemical Weapons – who to believe?

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The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, with its 193 Member States, is charged with the vital job of implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention. This complex task is fraught with challenges, as highlighted by recent events in Syria. Helena Cobban probes the controversy around deadly attacks in Douma, close to Damascus, in 2018. The author is a Senior Fellow at the Center for International Policy in Washington DC and chief executive of Just World Books and the non-profit Just World Educational (Justworldeducational.org).

In May 2019, a network of UK-based academics challenged allegations – which the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) officially corroborated on March 1 – that the Syrian government used chemical weapons against civilians in the outer Damascus suburb of Douma in April 2018. The challenge came in the form of a 15-page assessment, apparently prepared by a team of OPCW engineering experts, that seriously critiqued a fundamental conclusion of the March report. An unknown party leaked this assessment to the UK-based network, the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media. OPCW staff members have indirectly confirmed the authenticity of the assessment.

The main conclusions of the 15-page assessment seem very serious. But its diplomatic and political impact are no less serious. It threatens to bring the still-young OPCW to its biggest political crisis since 2002, when President George W. Bush and his allies unceremoniously ousted its first director-general, José Bustani, for reportedly wanting to deploy OPCW inspectors to Iraq, which could have complicated the lead-up to the invasion the Bush team was planning. (See *Spokesman* 75)

The leaked engineering assessment raises grave questions about the integrity of the OPCW's supposedly apolitical, purely technical internal processes and throws significant doubt on the OPCW accusation that the Syrian government was responsible for several earlier chemical weapons incidents. Douma was, after all, the only site the OPCW's own inspectors were able to visit and inspect. For all the other

incidents, the organization had to rely on reports produced by strongly pro-rebel organizations like the so-called ‘White Helmets’ or Al Jazeera. These reports spread speedily via various web platforms and prompted President Trump and his British and French allies to launch a barrage of 105 cruise missiles against Syrian government scientific facilities on 14 April 2018. Luckily, that act of unauthorized international aggression did not lead to any wider eruption of hostilities.

On 9 April, Syrian government forces quickly retook the locations in Douma where chemical weapons were allegedly used. Syria has been a full member of the OPCW since 2013. On 10 April 2018, it asked the OPCW to ‘urgently’ send a Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) to Douma to investigate and verify what happened there. On 12 April, an advance team from the FFM arrived in an unnamed ‘neighbouring country’. The US-led bombing occurred on the morning of 14 April. Later that day, some members of the FFM apparently arrived in Damascus. Over the month that followed, they were able to interview 13 witnesses and receive environmental and biomedical samples from Douma.

Because of continuing security concerns in Douma, the FFM was unable to deploy any of its team members there for a further week. But between 21 April and 1 May, FFM teams were able to inspect three key facilities in Douma: a hospital that had earlier been a White Helmets outpost and two residential buildings a short distance away, which were tagged in the OPCW report as ‘Location 2’ and ‘Location 4’.

Here are the uncontroversial facts about the Douma incident. While the area was still under the control of the Jaysh al-Islam rebels, some 43 people in the area died ghastly and much-photographed deaths from the effects of a chemical agent believed to have been chlorine, which also wounded an additional number of people. The first photos and videos of the non-fatal casualties were taken (according to their metadata) in the early afternoon of April 7. The first images of dead casualties – many of them in Location 2 – were taken around 10:30 that evening.

By noon of 8 April, electronic images showed, at Location 2, a partly damaged long yellow cylinder thought to contain some chlorine, that was shown lying on the building’s reinforced concrete roof, with one end hanging over a hole punched through the roof by an object of similar cross-section. Images from Location 4, meanwhile, showed a similar yellow cylinder, less damaged and still apparently full of chlorine, lying in a top-floor room in whose reinforced concrete ceiling an oval, similarly shaped hole had been punched. This cylinder was not under the hole but off to one side of it, incongruously positioned on a flimsy-looking double bed.

The difference of judgment between the ‘final’ report on the incident



Gas cylinder in Douma

that the OPCW issued on 1 March and the ‘engineering assessment’ leaked in May 2019 centred on the provenance of these two cylinders. How had they got to where they were photographed on 8 April and where they were later inspected by the Fact Finding Mission?

By the time the Fact Finding Mission arrived in Douma, the bodies had been long buried. The FFM did not exhume them. In its report, it stated that it was ‘not currently possible to precisely link the cause of the signs and symptoms [displayed by the casualties] to a specific chemical’. It stated that no organophosphorous nerve agents (such as sarin) were detected in any of the bio-medical or environmental samples it took, but the deadly chemical could have been ‘reactive chlorine’ of the kind contained in the two cylinders. The report stated that ‘the structural damage to the rebar-reinforced concrete terrace at Location 2 was caused by an impacting object with a geometrically symmetric shape and sufficient kinetic energy to cause the observed damage...’ Regarding the cylinder found at Location 4, it stated that, ‘The studies ... indicated that, after passing through the ceiling and impacting the floor at lower speed, the cylinder continued an altered trajectory, until reaching the position in which it was found.’ That is, the report stated that both cylinders had been delivered to their final, much photographed resting-places by being dropped onto the roof (at Location 2) or through the roof (Location 4.) The report did not specifically assign blame, but the only party using aircraft during the Douma battle that could have dropped the cylinders was the

Syrian army and perhaps their Russian allies.

The leaked engineering assessment punched a hole right through that conclusion. It is dated 27 February 2019 – just two days before the Fact Finding Mission’s final report was released. It includes several in-depth studies, including some based on simulations, of what the concrete roofs and their rebar would have looked like if they were impacted or pierced by the cylinders, as well as the damage the cylinders should have registered as result of those impacts. It concluded:

‘[T]he FFM engineering sub-team cannot be certain that the cylinders at either location arrived there as a result of being dropped from an aircraft ... In summary, observations at the scene of the two locations, together with subsequent analysis, suggest that there is a higher probability that both cylinders were manually placed at those two locations rather than being delivered from aircraft.’

If the cylinders were put into their final positions by hand and they were photographed there while Jaysh al-Islam was still in control of the area, then suspicion would of course fall on Jaysh al-Islam – not just for putting the cylinders into position but also for staging the whole incident in a way to lay blame on the Syrian government. Jaysh al-Islam would also likely bear some responsibility for the 43 gruesome deaths recorded in the many photos and videos taken during those two days and circulated so widely at the time.

The leaked engineering assessment contains eight pages of closely argued analysis, a list of appendices, and six pages of technical drawings. The end of the analysis bears the typed sign-off of a senior inspector who has been with the OPCW ever since it started getting staffed up in 1997-98. Each page is headed ‘UNCLASSIFIED – OPCW Sensitive / Do not circulate’. The first page is headed ‘DRAFT FOR INTERNAL REVIEW’ and bears a handwritten annotation: ‘Final version – for comments (by hand to TM [Team Members] only.’

The OPCW’s formal report contains a ‘Mission Timeline’ which records that ‘consultations with engineering experts’ lasted for much of October and November of last year and that ‘reception of engineering studies’ occupied much of December. Thus, considerable discussion between the engineering team and the FFM’s leadership probably took place during those months.

After the engineering assessment was leaked, the OPCW first tried to claim that the document had no standing in the organization. Then, in an

email to British journalist Peter Hitchens, it stated, ‘the OPCW Technical Secretariat is conducting an internal investigation about *the unauthorised release of the document in question*’ – a formulation that seems to concede its authenticity.

Questions about this very disturbing matter have been asked in the British Parliament. Officials in some non-Western states that are OPCW members are also reportedly demanding more information. In the United States, no members of Congress have yet raised this issue. But the Syrian rebels and their supporters have offered recent warnings of possible new chemical attacks in beleaguered Idlib. And on 21 May 2019, a State Department spokeswoman said that the Syrian government ‘might be renewing its use of chemical weapons’ in that region and warned that any use of such weapons would lead the United States and its allies to ‘respond quickly and appropriately’.

Surely, all those who remember how unfounded allegations about Weapons of Mass Destruction were used to catapult the military into the invasion of Iraq should be very wary of that ruse being pulled again.

I remember the hopes that so many of us had, back in the mid-1990s, when scores of countries worked together to negotiate the treaty that established the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. This was the first time that most of the world’s nations came together to ban an entire class of horrendous weapons and to establish a body (the OPCW) that could aid and monitor this process. In 2002, President Bush used his power on the world scene in a quite unacceptable way to bully the OPCW. It’s important to make sure that the power of the warmongers is not used once again to subvert the OPCW’s integrity, a development that could now, as in 2002-03, pave the way for a terrible war.

Update: On 13 June 2019, OPCW Director-General Fernando Arias released the text of a briefing he had given on this matter to the States Parties to the OPCW two weeks earlier. Arias did not utter the name of the long-time OPCW staff member whose name was on the leaked version of the dissident engineering report. But he confirmed that report’s author was an OPCW staff member who was ‘a liaison officer at our Command Post Office in Damascus,’ and ‘As such... he was tasked with temporarily assisting the FFM with information collection at some sites in Douma’.

Arias said that because the staff member’s report had ‘pointed at possible attribution’ of the Douma attack, it fell outside the purview of the Fact Finding Mission and therefore received no mention in the FFM’s report. However, he said, that on his advice the staff member had

submitted it to the separate Investigation and Identification Team working on the Douma incident, which has yet to start work. He stated that three external experts (also un-named) had conducted the analyses of the ballistics/physics of the cylinders' provenance whose conclusions were included in the FFM's 1 March report.

The conclusions of the dissident engineering report have meanwhile been endorsed by Professor Theodore Postol, a distinguished professor emeritus of Science, Technology, and International Security at MIT who has advised US presidents on strategic and scientific matters.

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