



DESTRUCTION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA

The author highlights the “unprecedented operation” carried out by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons which, together with the United Nations, has supervised this effort and international cooperation phase intended to take weapons of mass destruction out of Syria.

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By **Omar Locatelli**

SOME HISTORICAL FACTS

Since the 1980's Syria has been one of the countries that supports terrorism according to the US Department of State. However, the Syrian government states that they only allow for the opening of “press offices” of those radical organizations, mainly from Palestine, that call for resistance against the Israeli occupation of Palestine territories.

After the 9/11 event, the United States have called Iraq, Iran and North Korea the “axis of evil” and said that they were responsible for the main terrorist actions in the world carried out with the use of different types of actions and weapons.

As from January 2003, the famous Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from the United States mentioned Syria, Libya and Sudan as countries interested in acquiring or expanding secret arsenals of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) without specifying of which type.

On April 10, 2003, the Deputy Secretary for the Control of Armament and International Security, John Bolton, said it was a great opportunity for Syria to get involved in the elimination of Weapons of Mass Destruction that was being carried out in the Middle East region taking advantage of the alleged successful military operations of the United States in Iraq for their destruction.

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FEARED USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

After more than two years of civil war in Syria, on August

1. Locatelli, Omar; "Small Wars lead to Big Wars"; *Visión Conjunta*, No. 9, year 5; 2013

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21, 2013 at 2am, rockets with Sarin gas were launched from a bridge over the highway that connects Damascus (capital of Syria) with Homs (third major city) and from the Sironex factory in the neighbourhood of Qabun over the neighbourhood of Ghouta, which is in the suburbs of Damascus, an area where rebels were supported with the purpose of neutralizing an alleged entrance of 300 troops command (trained by the United States in Jordan) to attack Damascus with tanks, mechanized tanks and aircraft. The attack, apart from having caused the death of 1428 people (of which 526 were children) and 3600 injured people, showed the international community that the problem of chemical weapons, which was allegedly controlled, was still present and the greatest danger was that it was not possible to know who had the trigger.

Because of Russian influence, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, on September 9, Syria signed and ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention that sets forth the production, storage and use of chemical weapons. It also established the solution that if an international control over chemical weapons in Syria is established, attacks will be prevented and we will immediately start to work in Damascus.



THE DESIRED AGREEMENT

On September 13, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov and the UN mediator for the conflict, Lakhdar Brahimi, met in Geneva together with groups of weapon control officers. On the following day, Syria committed to destroy its chemical weapons by signing an agreement negotiated by the United States and Syria.

The multinational mission aimed at destroying them would be supervised by the UN Security Council and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and should be finished before June 30, 2014. The staff of the mission would be shared between both organizations. The initial step agreed by the Syrian government implied the destruction of 22 of the 33 places declared as used for the production and mixture of precursor agents that are part of chemical weapons. Meanwhile, the rest lies within an area still controversial.

The essence of the approved destruction Plan implied that the Syrian government would be responsible for the movement of chemical materials in controlled motorized columns (1) from the stores protected in Syrian territory to the port of Latakia (2) where they would be loaded to the Italian port of Gioia Tauro (3) and from there be loaded to the US vessel (prepared for that) Cape Ray, (4) to be later destroyed at sea.

In the port of Latakia, main precursor agents are separated from the secondary ones. The main precursor agent called “priority chemical product”, Isopropanol, is loaded to a Danish vessel which then waits in international waters for each additional shipment before its eventual sail setting to the Italian port of Gioia Tauro containers. A similar operation for chemical products that are less hazardous with “industrial quality” was carried out with a Norwegian vessel.





The United States take part with vessel Cape Ray MV with the main responsibility of making the hydrolysis process which implies the breakdown of chemical agents with hot water to be later neutralized with sodium hydroxide², using caustic soda or bleach³. Degradation is carried out in international waters in the Mediterranean Sea. In spite of the deadline, the US vessel kept mooring in the Spanish port of Rota until all priority chemical materials would have left Syria.

The vessel is an old container ship (launched in 1977) which was equipped with two mobile hydrolysis systems and which cost about 5 million dollars, developed in 2013 by an area of specialized research of the US forces. The two titanium reactors of the Cape Ray can process from 5 to 25 tons per day, depending on the purity of the material under treatment. The complete procedure may take up to 90 days and will generate 1.5 million gallons (5.7 million litres) of waste. A great part of the effluent would be even more hazardous but of a toxicity level that may be eliminated by a normal specific industry.

The mobile hydrolysis system, developed by the Pentagon and known as Field Deployable Hydrolysis system is designed to convert chemical agents into compounds that cannot be used for military purposes by mixing it with water and other chemical products and

2. At room temperature, sodium hydroxide is a crystalline white solid with no odor that absorbs air humidity (hygroscopic). It is a manufactured substance that when dissolved in water or neutralized with some acid material, it liberates a great amount of heat that may be enough to burn combustible materials.

3. Bleach is the name used for a variety of substances that in water solutions are oxidant, frequently used as disinfectant, bleaching agent and, in general, as organic matter solvent.



then heating them. It is usually used to neutralize a great amount of chemical precursors in a rapid way before the Syrian government could restore its arsenal of chemical weapons.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) assured that the degradation manner did not imply that any type of chemical product would be spilled into the sea. The final product, a highly diluted liquid, but still slightly toxic, would be transported to a commercial center for waste disposal that has not been identified. The vessel of 198 meters length has been equipped with additional security measures and air filters to carry out the procedure with total security. To the 35 members of the crew, it was necessary to add 63 people to meet special needs of the vessel and increase security.

The United Kingdom would also degrade the main precursor agents in its specialized plant in the port of Ellesmere, in the south of Manchester. Destruction would be carried out in Veolia facilities, in the city of Cheshire.

Germany has committed to burn neutralized sulphide waste of the Cape Ray in government facilities in Munster, belonging to the Lower Saxony. In spite of the initial German rejection to accept chemical weapons on its soil, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, Frank- Walter Steinmeier, said that the country had decided not to excuse from its responsibility.

Also, the United States assured that the greatest part of effluents and secondary chemical products will be processed in Port Arthur, Texas, in a plant that was previously used for the destruction of its own chemical weapons.

INITIAL OPTIONS OF THE PLAN

The dates initially scheduled were:

- › December 31, 2013: Initial deadline for the withdrawal of precursor agents of chemical products from Syrian territory, called “Priority One”.
- › February 5, 2014: Initial deadline for the withdrawal of less hazardous precursor agents of chemical products from Syrian territory, called “Priority Two”.
- › June 30, 2014: Deadline for the destruction of the whole chemical arsenal of Syria.

The initial plan approved by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons required that the 1,300 tons of the main chemical component would be out of Syria before the end on December, 2013. The rest of the components called priority two had to get out of the territory before February 5, 2014.

The approval of the plan took place on November 15, when Albania rejected to collaborate with the United States after Norway had reacted in the same way. In spite of the initial rejection, both Norway and Denmark offered vessels to take precursor agents out of Syria. Belgium

and France also rejected to participate by saying that destruction should take place in Syrian territory.

In one of the first announcements, the joint mission assured that the Syrian government had reached, on November 1, the date set for the destruction of its production facilities and load of chemical weapons.

The head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Ahmed Uzumcu, presented on December 17 the detail of plans for the destruction of more than 1,200 tons of chemical precursor agents. Surveillance inspectors checked the inventory of Syrian chemical weapons and confirmed the deactivation of the whole manufacturing equipment in 21 places, also informing that the destruction of facilities was being carried out.

Russia has also confirmed that it would provide security to transport and load within Syria using special containers and decontamination equipment supplied by the United States. Moreover, China supplied ten ambulances and survival equipment. Finland offered immediate response equipment. Denmark and Norway agreed to supply vessels that transport precursor agents and those that provide security. Russia and China offered to give naval security to transport to the Italian port, especially adapted to receive and transfer chemical load to the US vessel.

FIRST INCONVENIENCE

In spite of the initial plans of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to eliminate the most toxic agents before the end of the year and the rest by mid-February, these plans were delayed by a mixture of legal, environmental and security challenges. However, Denmark, Italy and Norway confirmed the shipment of



El buque Cap Ray MV en donde se realizó el proceso de hidrólisis.



Proceso de hidrólisis desarrollado dentro del buque.

The mobile hydrolysis system, developed by the Pentagon and known as Field Deployable Hydrolysis system is designed to convert chemical agents into compounds that cannot be used for military purposes by mixing it with water and other chemical products and then heating them.

resources capable of transporting chemical products, as no country had allowed for their destruction in their own territory. In order to avoid the problem, officers of Obama administration analyzed the possibility to prepare an auxiliary vessel of the US Navy, the Cape Ray, with mobile hydrolysis units.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed, on October 31, that Syria had completed the functional destruction of critical equipment for all the facilities for production, mixing and filling plants of chemical weapons turning them inoperable.

On December 3, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, expressed his great concern for the security of international inspectors that would supervise the destruction and elimination of chemical weapons in Syria and warned that an increase of confrontation among Syrian combatants would be a risk for their lives. He expressed his concerns in a letter to the UN Security Council in which he gave new details about the international plans for the elimination of the arsenal of Syria. He mentioned that the joint mission, integrated by 15 experts of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and 48 members of the UN, was getting ready on the field for the last and most dangerous stage of the operation: transport of a great amount of chemical agents through a war zone to the Syrian port of Latakia, where they would be sent outside the country.

THE TRUE BEGINNING OF THE OPERATION

The first shipment of 16 tons of priority chemical products left Latakia on January 7, 2014 in a Danish commercial vessel accompanied by vessels from Russia, China, Denmark and Norway. Once in Gioia Tauro, 560 tons of Priority One material, including sulfur gas and DF, the precursor agent of sarin, were transferred to the Cape Ray vessel so that, when sailing in international waters, could carry out neutralization by hydrolysis.



Sigrid Kaag, encargada del control de la misión.

The second load of chemical weapons was exported by ship on January 27. Anyway, the slow elimination and delayed domestic transport in Syria could not make it possible to comply with the initial deadline for the most hazardous precursor agents. At the same time, this increased concern due to the threat that some other deadline would not be complied with in less than two weeks.

On January 31, the Head of the UN chemical weapons surveillance body urged Syria to accelerate the elimination of its chemical weapons, a day after Washington accused the Syrian government of causing a deliberate halt in the elimination of weapons in order to acquire more negotiation power and, in a new complaint, of not complying with the commitment to destroy the 12 facilities that manufacture them. Syrians lost the first deadline set for December 31 for the elimination of the most hazardous toxins and, before missing the second deadline set for February 5, they also received a warning call.

At the same time, the Russian government, through its Foreign Relations vice minister, Gennady Gatilov, told RIA (the Russian news agency) on February 4 that Damascus authorities were planning a "great load" to complete the shipment of their chemical weapons outside the country on March 1 which was delayed more than one week.

FRAGILITY OF DATES AND ASSIDUITY OF DELAYS

On February 21, the Syrian government found another delay until mid-May for the export of its arsenal of chemical weapons and to destroy 12 facilities that manufactured ammunition before. The intention was to breach the deadline set for March 15 for the destruction of 12 facilities for chemical weapons manufacture, seven reinforced hangars and five subterranean structures

alleging that the action was onerous. Moreover, the Syrians proposed to deactivate the facilities but not to destroy them.

Diplomatic sources said, on February 26, that the last Syrian commitment to transport most of the chemical products left to its Mediterranean port of Latakia would be on April 13. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said that the fourth expedition which had mustard gas, had left Syria that day, urging Damascus to “keep the drive” in the shipment of chemical products. It also explained that shipment from two places, where security measures were scarce, would be delivered in Latakia on April 27 as there had been two attacks to the vehicles that transported the load.

The responsible for the Mission Surveillance, Sigrid Kaag, announced on March 4, that about a third of the material of chemical weapons from Syria had been removed or destroyed. She also stated that Syria had agreed to accelerate and intensify its efforts to remove chemicals in a new period of 60 days. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons stated that Damascus had already delivered more than six shipments of toxic agents confirming that two more were sent to the port of Latakia.

Two weeks later, on March 19, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons explained that two shipments, including some of the most lethal chemical products of the reserve were presented on March 14 and 17 in the port of Latakia, where they were transported to the cargo ships, totaling 10 shipments exported until that moment which are 45.6 per cent of the total. According to the announcement, about 29.5 per cent of precursor agents called Priority One, including the total amount of sulfur gas, had been destroyed. 82.6 per cent of precursor agents of Priority

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Two, which are not necessarily toxic but are ingredients for lethal gases and sarin agents had also been eliminated.

The revision of the schedule, that required the end of the shipment by the end of April instead of February 6 as it was set, came after Syria had lost the renewed schedule in an effort for destruction which was questioned worldwide. In this respect, Syria proposed to seal facilities but leave them intact, while the United States required the destruction arguing that otherwise they could reactivate.

On the following Wednesday, March 26, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons stated in a report to the United Nations that the total percentage of chemical substances that were eliminated or destroyed rose up to 53.6 per cent and that Syria committed to eliminate all chemical substances of its territory by April 13, with the exception of those that were in areas “that are currently inaccessible” which they estimated could be eliminated by April 27.

A spokesman of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Michael Luhan, announced on April 4, that Syria had delivered a lot of chemical weapons materials for export and destruction abroad for the first time in more than two weeks, showing a delay that increased concern about the preparation and capacity to comply with the recently extended deadline.

With the pressure of the deadline set for April 27, this Organization informed on April 18 that Syria had sent another shipment of toxic agents for destruction abroad, therefore the program would be complete in 75 per cent.

In the report, they explained that the 16^o shipment to the port of Latakia was of eight containers, including those of Priority One. This was the third one in less than two weeks, which showed an acceleration of Syrian shipments in an attempt to compensate long delays, thus, the deadline set for the beginning of February to finish the process was missed. Beyond the recent increase in the speed of deliveries, it seemed unlikely that Syria would be able to finish this action before the revised deadline set



for April 27, but there was the possibility to revise it some time later. The comment made by a spokesman was that the most important thing was that “we will soon be able to announce that all chemical agents have been eliminated.”

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons presented, on April 22, a new press release stating that almost 90 per cent of chemical substances had been withdrawn from the country and there were only two or three shipments left, adding that lot 17, reserve of chemical elements, had been delivered.

Sigrid Kaag said on April 27 that although the Syrian government had agreed to complete the delivery or destruction of its chemical agents; in fact, 92.5 of the arsenal that was destroyed was loaded and there has been significant progress to eliminate the 7.5 per cent left. However, it did not specify which chemical agents he referred to as “left”.

On May 8, Kaag announced that arsenals of chemical weapons from Syria that had not been taken yet, which were 8 per cent (about 100 tons), was still inaccessible as it was stored near an area under the power of insurgents. Moreover, he specified that experts in elimination would have less than one week to take material out once there was access to the place near Damascus. Material mentioned was 5 containers of the most hazardous substances and 11 containers of other chemical agents necessary to manufacture weapons.

THE TRUE BEGINNING OF THE END

The US Pentagon through a spokesman announced on

May 20 that Syria was starting to move the reserve of chemical weapons left. This piece of news followed a great announcement made by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons about the fact that this country had destroyed its whole declared arsenal of isopropanol, a main precursor agent for the production of sarin gas.

Now 7.2 per cent of the material of chemical weapons from Syria is still in the country and waits for the rapid elimination of destruction from now on. The Joint Mission urges Syrian authorities to carry out this task as soon as possible, said the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons of the United Nations in a press release.

On June 5, Sigrid Kaag called both the international community and the Syrian government to ensure that the last 16 containers of hazardous chemical products would be immediately withdrawn from the country. He added that safety conditions in the area under dispute, not far from Damascus, have been very volatile. He also mentioned that getting the last containers in the Danish and Norwegian vessels is very critical and asked for help to dominant nations. Last, he said that Syria would not comply with the deadline set for June 30 but that the joint mission was waiting to be completed and to deliver the work left within a short period of months.

A Norwegian load vessel which carried around 500 tons of chemical weapons from the Syrian government arsenal set sail on June 7 towards Finland and the United States. However, correspondents say that the

fight and threat of attacks by rebels have seriously delayed the elimination of weapons.

On June 23, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons announced that Syria delivered its materials left to be destroyed abroad and this was an important achievement for a country that was at war. However, it did not mention that Syria was free from all chemical weapons as the verification was not complete and reminded Syrian authorities that they had not destroyed a dozen facilities used for the manufacturing of ammunition.

Ahmed Uzumcu, president of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said proudly that never before a whole arsenal of mass destruction weapons had been eliminated from a country that has internal armed conflict, adding that this could be carried out under a strict deadline. Sigrid Kaag, who was responsible for the mission, showed enthusiasm.

DEADLINE NOT COMPLIED WITH AND PROPHETIC ANNOUNCEMENTS

Apart from the fact that Syria delivered the last container in time, its repeated delay in the transport of remaining chemical products caused the deadline set for June 30 for the destruction of chemical substances as agreed to be lost. This is due to the fact that, as from that moment, it would be necessary to have from two to four months for all products to be treated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea to make them not hazardous.

It could be foreseen that statements made by the veteran mediator of the UN, Lakhdar Brahimi, about Syria being a “failed state”, similar to Somalia and the conflict extending beyond its borders would not be true. The Western side did not want his predictions with

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respect to the fact that although the UN Security Council was not interested in Afghanistan, a small, poor and far away country, one day this surprised them, Syria was even worse!

The fact that the Syrian government did not have chemical weapons makes it possible to solve some tactical doubts although they become strategic when balancing the following options:

- › Sunni opposing rebels may be able to defeat government troops as these do not have a fearful manner to favourably unbalance conflicts.
- › President Bashar al- Assad, showing strength of his military instrument, still without chemical weapons may defeat rebels and then legitimate his new 7- year presidential term.
- › If Sunni terrorist rebels of the ISIL, in their expansion to create a caliphate with parts of Syria and Irak, impose themselves over Syrian rebels and troops loyal to Assad and can split territories of both countries, this would be worse.

When closing this chapter on conflicts by mid- 2014, at least one of the hegemonic powers of the region, Russia, which keeps supporting the Syrian government and which has always vetoed most of the resolutions issued by the Security Council, it is for the first time aware of the existence of more terrorist threat which could, apart from affecting both parties, consolidate and split territories. The vice minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Ryabkov, stated this in an appeal to the United States and Europe, aimed at taking “serious” steps to fight terrorism and warning about the threat over several Middle East countries and their corresponding regional extra support.

It is time for both disarming chemical threats and unifying western interests of all countries involved so that they can coexist with the real peace needs of the Syrian people Insha’Allah (may God want).

› REFEREE ARTICLE



Ahmed Uzumcu, president of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.