

# Chemical and Biological News

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## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

### **Israel reported to have bombed Syrian chemical weapons facility**

Syrian military appears to confirm media reports of attack on research centre near Mediterranean coast in night-time raid

*By Peter Beaumont, September 7, 2017*

Israeli jets have reportedly bombed a Syrian government facility in north-west of the country believed to be associated with Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons programme.

The strikes were initially reported by Hebrew and Arab media sources on Thursday morning. A Syrian military statement appears to confirm the reports.

The airstrike on the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre was reported to have taken place overnight. Western intelligence reports have linked the centre near the town of Masyaf to Syria's chemical weapons programme.

A statement from the Syrian military said the attack had occurred early on Thursday and hit a facility close to the Mediterranean coast. It said Israeli warplanes fired several missiles after entering neighbouring Lebanon's air space.

"Israeli warplanes at 2.42am fired a number of missiles from Lebanese air space, targeting one of our military positions near Masyaf, which led to material damage and the deaths of two members of the site," the army said in a statement.

It warned of the "dangerous repercussions of such hostile acts on the security and stability of the region".

Syrian opposition sources said four Israeli warplanes were involved in the strike. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, along with others, identified the target as the al-Talai facility, a site that had been subject to US sanctions for its role in the Syrian non-conventional weapons agency.

The strikes follow a series of statements by Israel in recent weeks accusing Iran of seeking to establish itself in Syria and Lebanon and of building a weapons factory, as the six-year Syrian civil war has continued to swing in favour of Assad.

Israel rarely confirms its strikes inside Syria but it has launched numerous strikes during the country's civil war, usually against arms convoys and weapons storage sites associated with Hezbollah, a key Assad ally.

An Israeli army spokeswoman declined to discuss reports of a strike in Syria, but Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, tweeted that the reported attack was not routine and targeted a Syrian military scientific centre.

"The facility at Masyaf also produces chemical weapons and explosive barrels that have killed thousands of Syrian civilians," he said.

Amir Eshel, a former Israeli air force chief, suggested in August that Israel had conducted dozens of airstrikes on weapons convoys destined for the Hezbollah over the past five years.

Washington claims the al-Talai centre developed the sarin gas weapon allegedly

used in a chemical attack on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun in April, which left about 80 people dead.

UN war crimes investigators announced on Wednesday they had an "extensive body of information" that indicated Syrian warplanes were behind the attack.

In a conference call with journalists, the former Israeli national security adviser Yaakov Amidror said the fact that the target was a Syrian military facility took Israeli intervention to a new level.

"I know the organisation and facility," he said. "For many years it has been one of the Syrian centres for research and development for weapons systems including chemical weapons ... and weapons that have been transferred to Hezbollah."

The only logical explanation for the attack was that the facility was producing weapons systems for Hezbollah, he said.

Even before the outbreak of the war in Syria, the al-Talai centre was on Israel's radar. The director of the Israeli national security council's counter-terrorism bureau called for the destruction of the centre in 2010, alleging it had provided weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Israel is conducting its biggest military exercise in 19 years on its northern border, involving tens of thousands of troops. It has been widely described as a dress rehearsal for a future war with Hezbollah, including civilian evacuation drills.

The strike, if confirmed, follows increasingly bellicose statements from senior Israeli government officials, including the country's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, about the advances Assad has made in the civil war, backed by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.

Netanyahu accused Iran last week of building sites to produce precision-guided missiles in Syria and Lebanon, but the commentator Amos Harel suggested in Haaretz that the Israeli action may have been a message aimed as much at Washington and Moscow as Tehran and Hezbollah after Israeli disquiet over a Russian-backed partial ceasefire in Syria.

"The United States, whose interest in Syria has been on the decline, acceded to the Russian initiative. Washington and Moscow also failed to heed Israeli protests that the agreement to reduce friction in southern Syria failed to require Iran and allied militias to steer clear of the Golan Heights," he wrote.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/07/israel-airstrike-syria-chemical-weapons-facility>

## **North Korea and the Threat of Chemical Warfare**

*By Theo Emery, October 27, 2017*

The war of words between President Trump and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un over Pyongyang's nuclear program has rattled nerves around the world. But the trial of two women in Malaysia for using the nerve agent VX to kill Mr. Kim's half brother is a reminder that North Korea's lethal arsenal isn't limited to nuclear weapons. The North's chemical weapons pose a grave risk to South Korea and to regional stability.

Experts say chemical munitions have long been deployed along the demilitarized zone that separates the North and South. In the event of a military attack against the North, analysts say, the regime sees chemicals as an option for a first response. Seoul and its 10 million inhabitants could be hit immediately.

Estimates of casualties are staggering. Images from Syria of children gassed with sarin in recent years have horrified the world; imagine a death toll in South Korea a thousand times larger.

In a June article in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the military historian Reid Kirby used the term "sea of sarin" to describe such an attack. Accounting for sarin's toxicity, the types of artillery along the DMZ, and vulnerability of children and the elderly, he estimated that a sarin attack could kill as many as 2.5 million people in Seoul and injure millions more. There are about 24,000 United States military personnel in South Korea, along with their families, and thousands of American expatriates.

No one outside of the North Korean government knows with certainty the composition of the country's chemical stockpile, but intelligence from defectors and the South Korean government suggests that Pyongyang has 2,500 to 5,000 metric tons of some 20 chemical warfare agents.

Experts have long suspected that the North's arsenal includes VX, which is far more toxic than sarin. The gruesome murder in February of Mr. Kim's estranged half brother, Kim Jong-nam - a brazen killing in a Malaysian airport that prosecutors say was carried out by two women, trained by North Korean agents, who rubbed the victim's face with VX - has dispelled any doubts that the North has the chemical. Unlike sarin, VX is "persistent," meaning it lingers in the environment rather than disperses. The mustard gas that drenched World War I battlefields is the original persistent chemical.

Kim Jong-nam's murder also raises the specter of new proliferation of chemical arms. The fact that VX made its way out of North Korea undetected to another country could indicate that Mr. Kim would use the North's extensive criminal smuggling networks to

secretly assist other nations, or nonstate actors, in obtaining or producing it.

The chemical menace from North Korea recalls a time when chemical weapons posed far more of a global threat than they do today. The doctrine of strategic deterrence - maintaining stockpiles of powerful weapons to keep a similarly armed adversary in check - didn't begin with nuclear weapons; rather, it emerged from gas warfare in World War I.

In the war's aftermath, the Geneva Protocol of 1925 banned chemical warfare but not chemical weapons. The rationale for that apparent contradiction was that rogue nations might disregard international law and use chemical arms to attack cities and civilian populations in much the way North Korea threatens to do today. The way to deter such attacks, the logic went, was to maintain a stockpile. If signatory nations suffered a chemical attack, they could then retaliate in kind.

The United States Senate, convinced that the agreement was folly in a dangerous world, refused to ratify the pact. Many nations developed sophisticated chemical weapons programs, as well as biological weapons. By the 1990s, the United States had an arsenal of 27,700 metric tons of chemical agents, and Russia had at least 40,000.

The threat of chemical warfare diminished because of the far greater power of nuclear weapons, but also because of the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, which outlawed the weapons altogether. The United States and South Korea are among the 192 nations party to the agreement, and they agreed to destroy their chemical arsenals. North Korea did not join.

After President Bashar al-Assad of Syria was accused of using sarin in 2013, he joined the convention. He promptly violated it with

more chemical barrages, including the sarin attack in Khan Sheikhoun in April that spurred President Trump to retaliate with a missile strike.

A similar show of force against Mr. Kim's regime could have catastrophic consequences for South Korea. The North's nuclear arms are one layer of deterrence against attack; the chemical arms are a second. Many experts say that Mr. Kim, if attacked with conventional weapons as a warning or a pre-emptive strike, could see chemical weapons as a way to retaliate without escalating to nuclear weapons.

After the Syrian sarin attack in April, Mr. Trump used unusually emotional terms in his speech about his decision to launch the missile strike. "Even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack," he said. "No child of God should ever suffer such horror."

Let's hope that the president's memory of those searing images will make him think twice before attacking Kim Jong-un. The fate of millions of South Koreans within range of Mr. Kim's chemical arsenal may depend on it.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/opinion/north-korean-chemical-weapons.html>

### **OPCW Aids Three African States in Devising Plans to Incorporate Chemical Weapons Convention into National Laws**

*August 31, 2017*

THE HAGUE, Netherlands - 31 August 2017 - Representatives of Benin, Djibouti and Ghana are better equipped in drafting national legislation for the implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), after participating in an Internship Programme for Legal Drafters and National

Authority Representatives held in The Hague from 7 to 11 August 2017.

The Internship Programme, which was conducted by members of OPCW's Technical Secretariat, enabled six participants from three countries to draft national legislation and to formulate a plan for its implementation.

A legal expert from Cameroon, Mr Patrick Endezoumou shared Cameroon's experience in developing and adopting CWC national implementing legislation. Mr Endezoumou was also a facilitator for the drafting sessions.

The programme covered a wide range of topics, including: overview of the legal requirements under the CWC, legal issues in national implementation, initial and annual declarations to the OPCW, the role of the National Authority, and provisions in national implementing legislation to address chemical terrorism.

After the presentations about the CWC and drafting sessions, participants from each country submitted a comprehensive National Action Plan and a summary of its draft legislation. The plan comprised a timeline for the adoption of the CWC which would serve as reference for the Technical Secretariat.

Since its launch in 2012, the Internship Programme has benefited 35 States Parties. Among these, Cape Verde, Grenada, Panama, Paraguay and Uganda have successfully enacted national legislation, while others are at various stages of the adoption process.

### **Background**

As the implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW oversees the global endeavour to permanently eliminate chemical weapons. Since the



Convention's entry into force in 1997 - with its 192 States Parties - it is the most successful disarmament treaty eliminating an entire class of weapons of mass destruction.

Ninety-five per cent of all chemical weapon stockpiles declared by possessor States have been destroyed under OPCW verification. For its extensive efforts in eliminating chemical weapons, the OPCW received the 2013 Nobel Prize for Peace.

<https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-aids-three-african-states-in-devising-plans-to-incorporate-chemical-weapons-convention-into-national-laws/>

### **Russia vetoes U.S. effort to extend Syria chemical weapons investigation**

*By Pamela Falk Cbs News, October 24, 2017*

UNITED NATIONS -- Russia vetoed a U.N. Security Council vote on a U.S.-sponsored resolution to extend the mandate of chemical weapons inspectors in Syria.

The veto will prevent inspectors from doing their job and investigating chemical weapons attacks in Syria unless a new agreement is struck to extend them before mid-November.

The resolution did garner 11 votes, so it would have passed if not for the Russian veto. France, which holds the presidency, read the vote. Ambassador Francois Delattre said that the vote failed because of the veto.

U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley, who is traveling in Africa, condemned the Russian veto. "Russia has once again demonstrated it will do whatever it takes to ensure the barbaric Assad regime never faces consequences for its continued use of chemicals as weapons," she said in a statement.

"It stinks," Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said before the vote, but after Russia failed in its proposal to postpone the vote until after the report is issued. "Why put the cart before the horse? Russia is always guilty in everything."

The vote took place days before a report is due on who is responsible for an attack that killed nearly 100 civilians, including children, in Syria's Idlib province six months ago.

A joint investigation between the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the U.N. is expected to say who was to blame for the attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Nebenzia said that the vote today "in no way" will have an impact on the work of the inspectors, and that Russia is ready to extend the mandate after the report is issued.

Earlier this month, Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, head of Russia's delegation to the General Assembly's disarmament committee, told reporters at the U.N. that Russia wanted to wait for the inspectors' report.

Russia, which is an ally of the Assad regime in Syria, has been critical of the work of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) program, which was created with Russian approval and was passed unanimously by the Security Council in 2015. It was later renewed in 2016.

When the OPCW found traces of "sarin or sarin-related chemicals" in an earlier attack in Syria, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley said it was "clear that the Syrian regime not only lied about the extent of their chemical weapons program, but that they will continue to refuse to cooperate with watchdog organizations like the OPCW."

OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü said "the perpetrators of this horrific attack must be held accountable for their crimes."

Haley urged other members of the U.N. Security Council to join the U.S. in voting to renew the mandate of the JIM for another year when it expires in November.

"The Russians have made it very clear that should the report blame the Syrians suddenly they won't have faith in the JIM. If the report doesn't blame the Syrians, then they say that they will. We can't work like that," Haley said. "We can't go and pick and choose who we want to be at fault, who we don't."

In June of this year, a report released by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) confirmed that people were exposed to a chemical weapon called sarin in April 2017 in the Khan Sheikhoun-area.

The report was sent to the U.N. Security Council and the OPCW.

Last year, the JIM found that the Syrian government was behind at least three attacks involving chlorine gas and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was responsible for at least one involving mustard gas.

The Khan Sheikhoun provoked worldwide horror after images of infants and children were shown dying from exposure to the chemical weapons.

In retaliation for the Khan Sheikhoun attack six months ago, the Trump administration launched 59 cruise missiles at the Shayrat military airfield in Homs province, Syria, in April.. It was the first direct American assault against the Assad regime since that country's civil war began.

The history of the agreement is important to remember. The Assad government was

responsible for a sarin nerve agent attack as far back as 2013 in a Damascus suburb of Ghouta, where 1,000 people died and the then-Obama administration threatened a military response, only to reverse course.

In a diplomatic agreement, Syria agreed to destroy its declared chemical weapons, but kept some of its undeclared stockpiles.

Russia has complained frequently about the work of the JIM. And on Monday, in anticipation of the vote, the Foreign Ministry said the extension of the JIM mandate "should depend on the quality of its work" for which it needs to read the final report.

The Security Council has until mid-November to renew the mandate of the inspectors

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-veto-es-u-s-effort-to-extend-syria-chemical-weapons-investigation/>

### **North Korea also has nerve agent VX, chemical weapons expert warns**

*By Nick Bailey and Michele Neubert, September 24, 2017*

Amid a flurry of missile tests and inflammatory rhetoric, the world's attention is focused on North Korea's nuclear program.

But one expert believes the rogue state's stockpile of chemical weapons could also bring catastrophic consequences.

The Center for Nonproliferation Studies estimates North Korea has between 2,500 and 5,000 metric tons of chemical weapons.

In particular, it has a large supply of VX, the deadliest nerve agent ever created; last year it was used to assassinate Kim Jong Un's half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, at Kuala Lumpur airport.

The chemical stockpile could harm thousands of people if it were attached to a missile or if it ended up in the hands of Islamist extremists, according to Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, former commanding officer of the U.K. Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Regiment (CBRN) and NATO's Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion.

"The chance that North Korea might provide jihadis with some of their chemical or nuclear capability is a huge concern at the moment," he said. "What some people forget ... is that in 2006 North Korea helped [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad and his regime set up their own nuclear program which was destroyed by the Israelis. But only as recently as a few weeks ago, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons intercepted two North Korean ships heading towards northern Syria with equipment to make chemical weapons."

De Bretton-Gordon has described VX as "the most toxic chemical weapon ever produced," highlighting that even a "microscopic amount" can prove deadly. VX also featured in the 1996 action thriller "The Rock."

It's banned under several international conventions and was designated a weapon of mass destruction by a U.N. resolution in April 1991. Its origins date back to the early 1950s, when a British scientist named Ranajit Ghosh was researching pesticides and developed the "V-series" of nerve agents - the V stood for "venom."

De Bretton-Gordon, who now works for military supplier Avon, fears impoverished Pyongyang could be more tempted to sell its chemical stockpile as it grapples with toughening global sanctions.

"We know that the jihadis have a lot of money and only last year tried to buy a highly enriched uranium from Russian criminals for

\$40 million a kilogram," he said. "So, would Kim Jong Un sell deadly VX for \$40 million a kilogram? I think absolutely they would the more that they get pushed."

However, Professor Hazel Smith at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) says that would be a major change in policy for the North Korean regime.

"Historically North Korea values state sovereignty and doesn't value interactions with non-state entities such as ISIS and al Qaeda," she said. "Given the level of surveillance over their shipping activities it's also unlikely they would be able to, or try to transport weapons."

She says the regime would be more concerned right now with protecting its oil imports, which are still flowing despite economic sanctions.

There also fears that North Korea could put VX to use itself. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has warned of that possibility, and Pyongyang's recent successful missile launch tests and nuclear tests have heightened the likelihood of chemical warfare in any conflict on the Korean peninsula.

"I think we now know that they have 5,000 tons of VX," de Bretton-Gordon said, speaking to NBC News at the Defence and Security Equipment International conference in London. "We know they have missiles capable of firing 4,000 to 6,000 miles, probably with a payload of half a ton, so half a ton of VX in those missiles could kill tens of thousands of people, and they could do that now, so that is a genuine concern."

He added: "We are focusing on the nuclear ... but whatever military option there is [for dealing with] North Korea, it must include mitigating and destroying that very large stock of VX that we know of."

But Smith says chemical weaponry doesn't form part of the regime's strategic plans.

"Were there to be an escalation of the current crisis, there would next be the use of conventional weapons. [North Korea] would not need chemical weapons for an attack on Seoul [and] if it did ... it would invite a wholesale global response to any military conflict between North and South Korea."

North Korea has said in public statements that it wants an official end to the Korean War, which was halted by a 1953 armistice but not ended by peace treaty. It also wants nothing short of full normalization of relations with the U.S. and to be treated with respect and as an equal in the global arena.

<https://www.aol.com/article/news/2017/09/24/north-korea-also-has-nerve-agent-vx-chemical-weapons-expert-warns/23221091/>

### **Revealed: Pak Arming Hizbul Mujahideen With Chemical Weapons**

According to the accessed transcripts, Hizbul members have already got their hands on these chemical weapons.

*By Manoj Gupta, July 12, 2017*

New Delhi: Pakistan is arming the terror group Hizbul Mujahideen with chemical weapons to carry out terror strikes in Kashmir, audio excerpts intercepted by security agencies have revealed.

These transcripts are undeniable and damning proof of how Pakistan is aiding and abetting terror activities in Pakistan. Terror outfits have lost 90 members to military offensives during the past few months, and hitting back with chemical weapons may be a desperate way for Hizbul to get back at the Indian security establishment.

According to the accessed transcripts, Hizbul members have already got their hands on these chemical weapons. Plans to use these weapons, primarily at forces, seem to be a desperate attempt to retaliate against the back-to-back successful offences launched by the security forces.

"Peer Sahib [LeT chief Hafiz Muhammed Saeed] wants me, but my people want me back. Our next programme will be after Eid...We will plan our next move after Eid," says the transcript accessed by News 18.

Members of this outfit hope to surprise the Indian security forces, which have so far been dealing in conventional weaponry, with this chemical attack. "Inshallah, we are going to get lots of support from Pakistan...things are happening along the border. In days to come, Pakistan will step-up its anti-India game,' a Hizbul operative can be heard saying at one point.

At another instance, this operative adds, "Till now we've used grenade launchers on the Indian army...killing just 3-4 and injuring a few. But now it's time to change our tactics. We will straightaway use chemical weapons...to kill as many as possible at the same time."

Hizbul Mujahideen is the biggest terror outfit in the Valley with around 200 active members. Its members are suspected to have aided Monday's Amarnath Yatra attacks.

Seven pilgrims were killed and several injured on Monday evening when terrorists attacked a bus carrying the pilgrims in Batingu, near Anantnag, Jammu and Kashmir.

The Jammu and Kashmir Police said that the Lashkar-e-Taiba was responsible for the attack on a bus carrying Amarnath pilgrims, which has been denied by the group.



"There is a LeT hand behind the terror attack on Amarnath pilgrims in Anantnag district where seven yatis were killed and 19 were injured. Investigation is still going on. Security has been reviewed," the IG Kashmir said. Meanwhile, LeT condemned the attack on the pilgrims and called it a 'reprehensible' and 'un-Islamic' attack.

Reacting to CNN-News18's report, BJP leader RK Singh said, "If this sort of escalation take place then that will lead to war. Handler of Hizbul Mujahideen need to think carefully. This will lead to massive outrage in India and world."

LT General (Retd) GD Bakshi said, "It seems they are looking for a big terror attack. You (CNN-News18) have done great service by exposing this."

<http://www.news18.com/news/india/revealed-pak-arming-hizbul-with-chemical-weapons-1459029.html>

### **North Korea could be mass producing biological weapons to unleash smallpox and plague, report warns**

Programme to develop deadly chemicals such as anthrax reportedly began in 1960s

*By Caroline Mortimer, October 23, 2017*

North Korea is likely to be developing biological weapons alongside its nuclear programme, a new report has warned.

A new study by the Belfer Centre, a US thinktank, warns that Pyongyang is likely to have a programme to develop its biological weaponry.

Based on testimony from defectors, it is believed to have begun in the 1960s after the Korean War between 1950 and 1953 caused the deaths of thousands in outbreaks of cholera, typhus, typhoid, and smallpox

which the regime blamed on biological attacks by the US.

Following the assassination of Kim Jong-un's brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia with the deadly nerve agent VX in February which reputedly came from the Pyongyang Bio-technical Institute.

The state research centre is run by the North Korean Army and was visited by the dictator himself according to photos which emerged in 2015.

It is thought to be producing several different diseases and manmade biological weapons that the US deems dangerous such as plague, anthrax, viral haemorrhagic fevers and smallpox.

South Korean intelligence believes there are at least three possible biological weapons production facilities and seven research centres associated with developing them.

The authors of the report say although the majority of the international community's attention has been focused on the ramping up of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, their biological programme also needs attention.

They said: "Preparation against BW [biological weapons] is urgent and necessary, which will also serve as defence against naturally occurring epidemics that increasingly threaten the 21st century. "Military and public health sectors should cooperate to urgently prepare for 'dual-response' mechanisms.

"Components of a well-established 'dual-response' program should include the best possible threat assessment by military and intelligence communities, a strong public health detection and response system, a well-coordinated crisis communication

strategy among multiple stakeholders, and compliance from an informed public."

The report also warns that they do not know the extent of the programme or how fast North Korean agents would be able to deploy them.

It quoted a recent statement by the South Korean Defence Ministry which said Pyongyang could weaponise 13 types of biological agents within 10 days.

Weaponising means stabilising and preparing dangerous biological agents such as anthrax, yellow fever or plague to be ready for release against their chosen target.

The report said it was also unclear how these biological weapons could be deployed and methods could range from using missiles, drones, aeroplanes, sprays and even human beings to cause devastation on mass scale.

It noted that North Korea had 200,000 members in its special forces and "even a handful of those special forces armed with biological weapons would be enough to devastate South Korea" and that agents did not need sophisticated training in order to spread the diseases to their intended targets.

The report warned that it was "theoretically possible" for the regime to deploy hundreds of sleeper agents to carry out attacks "disguised as cleaning and disinfection personnel" deploying the weapons "with backpack sprayers" or for them to release dangerous chemicals and bacteria into the water supply.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-biological-weapons-belfer-centre-pyongyang-nuclear-kim-jong-un-smallpox-plague-nerve-gas-a8015931.html>

## **Is the U.S. Really Targeting Russians With Bio Weapons?**

One expert says there are easier ways to kill off a population

*By Evan Gershkovich, November 3, 2017*

President Vladimir Putin on Monday held a conference with the Civil Society and Human Rights Development Council fielding questions on the topics du jour - theater director Kirill Serebrennikov's embezzlement trial and the recent knife attack on journalist Tatiana Felgenhauer.

At one point, council member Igor Borisov raised concerns that foreigners were taking photos of Russians, for unknown - potentially malicious - purposes, he implied.

But that was no concern of Putin's. He brushed the question aside to pivot to an altogether more unexpected concern: That foreigners are collecting biomaterials across Russia - "purposefully and professionally." This, the president seemed to suggest, was the more nefarious affair.

"Why are they going to different ethnic groups and to people living in different geographical locations across Russia?" the president asked. "Why are they doing this?"

That night, Franz Klintsevich, the deputy chairman of the Federation Council's Committee for Defense and Security, offered a theory.

"I'm not saying that this is about preparing a biological war against Russia," he wrote on his Facebook page. "But those scenarios, without a doubt, are being developed. That is to say, in case the need suddenly arises."

It wasn't long until some of Russia's most infamous officials were adding to the charged

rhetoric. The collection of Russian fluids, organs and tissues, said Gennady Onishchenko of the Duma's committee on education and science, is "nothing other than proof that the United States has not ceased its offensive military program."

To cap it off, Onishchenko claimed there was a "belt of biological warfare facilities" surrounding Russia in neighboring Georgia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

### **The U.S. explanation**

In July, Russian state-run network RT discovered that the U.S. Air Force had put out a request to acquire samples of synovial fluid, which fills joint cavities, and ribonucleic acid (RNA) from Russians. They would be "collected from Russia and must be Caucasian," the request read. The samples, the Air Force said, would further research on the musculoskeletal system.

Bo Downey, a spokesperson, told RT that the ongoing study by the Medical Air Force Molecular Research Center required further samples. Because the first data set sent by an American company had included samples collected in Russia, the second set would need Russian samples too.

"The main thing here is the task of keeping the research clean," Downey told the Meduza news outlet.

Mikhail Davydov, the head of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, told The Moscow Times that there was nothing new about how Russian samples were being collected.

"This has been going on for twenty years," he said, adding that the practice was reciprocal. "We send material to various countries, and they send material to us."

Could a U.S. bio-weapon really kill off Russians?

In the past, there has been some speculation that a specific ethnic group could be targeted with a biological weapon, potentially through a process known as "RNA interference."

The process, discovered by Andrew Fire and Craig Mello in 1998 - which earned them the Nobel Prize in 2006 - renders certain genes inactive. It is thought to be a promising technology for the treatment of diseases like arthritis by "silencing" malignant genes.

But could RNA interference be used to target the Russian ethnic group? Konstantin Severinov, a professor of molecular biology and biochemistry at the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology and Rutgers University in the U.S., says it would be "impossible."

"For it to work, the weapon would have to target a group of people with a shared specific genetic marker while excluding anyone who doesn't have that marker," he explained.

"In a modern country the size of Russia - or the United States or China, for example - these kinds of specific markers just don't exist, since people living there have long, mixed genetic histories. The guy standing next to you on the metro in Moscow could be more dissimilar to you genetically than some guy on the subway in New York."

Mikhail Gelfand, deputy director of the Institute for Information Transmission Problems of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said that the goal of studying genetic material is primarily to cure diseases, not to develop weapons.

"If such weapons were possible, we would have already cured cancer by now," he said. "That would be relatively easy: The patient

is right in front of you, so you don't have to drop something out of an airplane and hope it lands on people below."

Gelfand also said that, hypothetically, it could be possible to develop a biological weapon but only to target some very isolated group that hadn't been in contact with anyone else for thousands of years.

"It is probably possible if you spend a lot of money to develop a weapon that could exterminate the inhabitants of some isolated island," said Gelfand. "But it would be much easier to just show up and kill them."

### **‘Majorly deceived’**

On Thursday, Onishchenko called the American explanation a "clumsy, ill-conceived legend."

"If the person who had been explaining this had revealed their actual goals, they would have had to shoot him," he said, adding he was proposing new legislation that would protect Russians' "biological security."

But there have been worries over the extraction of biological materials before. In 2007, the Federal Customs Service banned their export after Nikolai Patrushev, the then- head of the FSB, expressed concern to Putin over the development of biological weapons.

Perhaps, some have wondered, the head of state was misinformed again.

Gelfand, in an earlier interview with the NSN radio station, put it bluntly. "Someone majorly deceived Vladimir Putin," he said.

A Russian Twitter user echoed the point - and, in turn, made light of the fuss: "Someone misled Putin again. A bunch of biomaterial has been sitting at the entrance to our building for several weeks and no one's taking it away."

Another user joked: "Left some biomaterial in the elevator for the CIA."

On Thursday, Russian media reported that the laboratory accused of exporting Russian biomaterials was among ten organizations that received the Russian government's award for service quality on Nov. 1. The announcement was signed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/is-the-us-suddenly-targeting-russians-with-bio-weapons-59464>

## **DISARMAMENT**

### **OPCW Deputy Director-General Visits Russia to Mark Closure of Kizner Chemical Weapons Destruction Facility**

*September 29, 2017*

THE HAGUE, Netherlands - 29 September 2017 - At the invitation of the Government of the Russian Federation, Deputy Director-General Hamid Ali Rao, on behalf of the OPCW, participated today in a ceremony on the completion of operations at the Kizner Chemical Weapons Destruction Facility in the Udmurt Republic. This also marks the completion of the full destruction of the 39,967 metric tons of chemical weapons that had been possessed by the Russian Federation.

The Deputy Director-General attended a video conference with President of the Russian Federation, H.E. Mr Vladimir Putin; together with Presidential Envoy to the Volga Federal District and Chairman of the State Commission for Chemical Disarmament, Mr Mikhail Babich; Minister of Industry and Trade, Mr Denis Manturov; and the Head of the Federal Directorate for Safe Storage and Disposal of Chemical Weapons, General Valery Kapashin.



The Closing Ceremony at Kizner was attended by high-ranking officials and representatives of the State Commission for Chemical Disarmament and various ministries and agencies of the Russian Federation. Also present were representatives of the States Parties that assisted the Russian Federation with its destruction programme.

Ambassador Rao acknowledged the efforts of the Russian Government to destroy its entire stockpile in a safe and efficient manner. He also recognised the important financial and in-kind contributions made by other OPCW Member States in support of these efforts.

Since this facility was commissioned in December 2013, a dedicated team of specialists and support staff from both the Russian facility personnel and Technical Secretariat have carried out the challenging task of destroying and then verifying a large portion of Russia's chemical weapons legacy, more than 5,745 metric tonnes of chemical agents, including sarin, soman, VX and lewisite were rendered unusable in Kizner. This facility was responsible for the destruction of almost 2,187,000 munitions in various calibres.

With the completion of Russian chemical weapon destruction activities at Kizner, 96.3 per cent of all chemical weapon stockpiles declared by possessor States have been destroyed under OPCW verification. For its extensive efforts in eliminating chemical weapons, the OPCW received the 2013 Nobel Prize for Peace.

## **Background**

As the implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW oversees the global endeavour to permanently eliminate chemical weapons. Since the

Convention's entry into force in 1997 - with its 192 States Parties - it is the most successful disarmament treaty eliminating an entire class of weapons of mass destruction.

<https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-deputy-director-general-visits-russia-to-mark-closure-of-kizner-chemical-weapons-destruction-facility/>

## **OPCW Marks Completion of Destruction of Russian Chemical Weapons Stockpile**

*October 11, 2017*

THE HAGUE, Netherlands -11 October 2017- In the margins of the 86th Session of the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), a ceremony to mark the completion of the destruction of the Russian Federation's chemical weapons took place today at the residence of Ambassador Alexander Shulgin, the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW. The Permanent Representatives and delegates from States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and OPCW Technical Secretariat staff attended the ceremony.

The Head of the Russian National Authority, Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade, Mr Georgy Kalamonov, delivered a statement expressing his thanks to the OPCW and States Parties for supporting the destruction programme.

OPCW Director-General, Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü, acknowledged the remarkable achievement by the Russian Federation and presented a memorable certificate to Deputy Minister Kalamonov marking the full destruction of the 39,967 metric tons of Russian chemical weapons. He also gave a commemorative plate to General Viktor Kholstov to recognise his personal

commitment to and efforts in achieving this milestone.

The OPCW's inspection teams have verified the destruction at seven chemical weapons destruction facilities in the Russian Federation. On 27 September 2017, the last of these facilities, located in Kizner, officially concluded its operations.

With the total elimination of Russia's declared chemical weapons programme, 96.3 per cent of all chemical weapon stockpiles declared by possessor States have been destroyed under OPCW verification.

## **Background**

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<https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-marks-completion-of-destruction-of-russian-chemical-weapons-stockpile/>

## **Search Continues for Chemical Weapons in Lincolnshire**

*October 9, 2017*

A Lincolnshire wood remains closed a week after canisters containing mustard gas were unearthed.

Police and other agencies are continuing to search Roughton Moor Woods, near Woodhall Spa, Lincolnshire. Sonar is being used to help search a nearby lake.

Two people were treated in hospital for minor burns after making the find.

A woman and two men have been arrested and bailed on suspicion of possessing a noxious substance.

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Lincolnshire Police said investigators were "conducting tests and removing the contaminated items".

Ch Insp Dan Whyment said he appreciated the public's patience and said the search would continue this week "and possibly beyond".

"We're very much aware that people want to see the woodland reopened and we're doing our best to make sure that this happens as soon as possible," he said.

"We hope that people aren't unduly worried as we've been working at the location for some time now.

"I'd like to reiterate that this is simply to ensure that we are being thorough and public safety remains our priority."

Officers have also searched addresses in Woodhall Spa and Lincoln, but no further noxious substances were recovered.

The canisters found at Roughton Moor are believed to be leftover from an RAF station and military base which was on the site from 1942 until it closed in the late 1960s.

Mustard gas was used as a weapon during World War One and outlawed by the Geneva Protocol of 1925.

The people burnt when they unearthed canisters had been digging for vintage bottles in the woods.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-41552907>