



Thousands march in Barcelona to protest jailing of separatists

DR Congo ex-child fighters trapped in a twilight zone

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CALIFORNIA: Supporters of Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad protest the US-led coalition attack in Syria in Los Angeles, California. Air attacks were carried out by US, France and Britain forces on three sites in Syria believed to be associated with the production of chemical weapons, in response to the latest use of deadly gas on civilians. —AFP

In Syria strikes, US blurs red line

Trump blasts Assad as a 'Gas Killing Animal'

WASHINGTON: With the latest US missile strikes, President Donald Trump appears to have reset America's red line for military intervention in Syria over the use of chemical weapons. What's unclear is where that red line now stands. The United States said its strikes were a response to President Bashar Al-Assad's chemical weapons attack on April 7 that administration officials say employed chlorine and perhaps even sarin, a more deadly nerve agent. "A large body of information indicates that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons," US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley told the UN Security Council on Saturday.

Sarin had previously appeared to be the threshold for intervention. A sarin attack triggered Trump's decision last year to strike a Syrian air base. A sarin attack in 2013 was also what nearly brought then-President Barack Obama to strike Syria. Chlorine, in contrast, has been used more widely in Syria's conflict without past US reprisals, and the chemical itself is far easier to find and weaponize, experts say. That makes degrading it through military strikes far more difficult.

"Every city in the Middle East that has a water purification system probably has some chlorine. It is a common

industrial chemical," said Daryl Kimball at the Washington-based Arms Control Association, who favors broad action to deter use of chemical weapons, including chlorine. As of Saturday, it was unclear whether another chlorine attack would be enough to trigger more US strikes, or whether the death toll would need to be high enough or whether - as was the case on April 7 - sarin use would also need to be a possibility.

Or perhaps there would need to be a series of violations, as was the case before April 7, prior to any US action. The Trump administration offered veiled threats on Saturday about future military action and mixed remarks about the degree to which it believed sarin was used by Syria's government, which denies it used chemical weapons. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said he was only

certain about intelligence that chlorine gas was used by Assad's forces on April 7 before America's strikes on Syria.

He did not rule out sarin use. Vice President Mike Pence also said Trump carried out the strikes armed with US intelligence that at "a minimum it was the chemical weapon of chlorine," noting investigators still might prove sarin was used. A different Trump administration official, briefing reporters, said the United States assessed that sarin was also used in the April 7 attack but suggested that US information on sarin came from analysis of reports from news media and other public sources of information, as opposed to US intelligence.

It was unclear whether Trump thought sarin had been used when he said on Twitter on Wednesday that US missiles "will be coming" and accused Assad of being a

"Gas Killing Animal." A 2015-2017 joint inquiry of the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had found the Syrian government used sarin in an April 4, 2017, attack and has also several times used chlorine as a weapon. It blamed Islamic State militants for mustard gas use. That inquiry ended in November after Russia, which backs Assad, blocked three attempts by the UN Security Council to renew its mandate. Moscow slammed the joint UN and OPCW inquiry as flawed.

Ahead of the latest strikes, Haley signaled in the Security Council on Friday that any action by Washington would not be in response to just the attack in Douma. "The United States estimates that Assad has used chemical weapons in the Syrian war at least 50 times. Public estimates are as high as 200," she said. On Saturday, she hinted the United States would strike again if Assad used chlorine, but stopped short of specifying which chemical agent she was referring to. "If the Syrian regime uses this poison gas again, the United States is locked and loaded. When our president draws a red line, our president enforces the red line," Haley said on Saturday. —Reuters



Sarin or chlorine attack? Experts weigh reactions

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After Ghouta, Syria army targets the cradle of revolt

BEIRUT: The capture of Eastern Ghouta is a significant milestone for Syria's regime and paves the way for government troops to shift south to where the seven-year uprising first began: Daraa. After securing the capital from deadly rockets that once rained in from its suburbs, President Bashar Al-Assad now has forces ready to re-deploy elsewhere in the war-ravaged country. The Islamists and jihadists that hold the northwest province of Idlib remain a threat, but analysts say Assad's priority will likely be the southern province of Daraa, where protests against his rule first broke out in 2011.

After losing swathes of territory to rebels, Syria's army has regained control of more than 55 percent of the country with crucial help from its ally Russia, according to analyst Fabrice Balanche. Its most recent victory is in Ghouta: the onetime rebel bastion that has now been neutralized after a blistering air and ground assault and the Russia-brokered evacuation of thousands of rebels and civilians. "The liberation of Eastern Ghouta means lifting the security and military threat posed to Damascus," said Bassam Abou Abdallah, who heads the Damascus Centre for Strategic Studies. "After Ghouta, it's likely the Syrian government will head south-the current situation in Daraa must be finished off," he told AFP. The regime said it had retaken Eastern Ghouta on Saturday after a nearly two-month assault that killed more than 1,700 civilians and the evacuation deals that saw rebels and civilians bussed up to northern Syria.

'Real problem' of Daraa

With Ghouta now taken care of, the only risk posed to Damascus stems from a few southern districts still held by the Islamic State group, including the Yarmuk Palestinian camp. Al-Watan newspaper, which is close to the government, said the army will seek to "finish off" those districts, but analysts believe the regime's real interest lies elsewhere. "Maintaining some IS pockets serves the regime's narrative in order to reconquer the rest of Syrian territory," said Julien Theron, a professor at the Paris Institute of Political Studies. He said the regime could redeploy



DARAA: Syrian schoolchildren walk past destroyed buildings in the southern city of Daraa. —AFP

troops to reinforce other fronts against rebels, including Daraa which he described as a "real problem". The vast Daraa province lies south of Damascus and also shares borders with Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Non-jihadist rebels, backed by the United States and Jordan, hold nearly three-quarters of it and parts of the provincial capital, also called Daraa.

"The regime has been focusing on Daraa province for a long time, trying to break through rebel territory to reach the city," said Theron. "Rebels control Syria's southern border, which has undermined the regime's image of being the master of its own territory," he added. Retaking the Nasib border crossing with Jordan, held by rebels since 2015, is a particular prize as it could bring financial rewards for a cash-strapped regime. In the past, the crossing has been a key transit point for trade between Syria, Jordan and the countries of the Gulf.

But analysts also say Assad's regime will have to avoid any escalation with Israel. "The areas in the south of Syria are particularly sensitive because they are located between Damascus on the one hand, and the Jordanian and Israeli borders on the other," analyst Sam Heller said. "Any military action could affect the national security of the three countries," said the researcher at the International Crisis Group. Thomas Pierret, a Syria specialist at the University of Edinburgh, said Daraa was the obvious next step for the regime after Ghouta, over Idlib. "Daraa is probably more urgent for economic reasons and reopening trade with Jordan." —AFP

May faces backlash for bypassing MPs on Syria

LONDON: British Prime Minister Theresa May faced a backlash from the domestic opposition after launching military strikes on Syria without consulting parliament. As the Conservative leader explained her rationale for the air strikes, opposition parties claimed the attacks were legally dubious, risked escalating conflict and should have been approved by lawmakers.

The shadow of the 2003 invasion of Iraq still lingers in the corridors of Britain's parliament, when MPs backed then-prime minister Tony Blair in joining US military action. "Bombs won't save lives or bring about peace," said Jeremy Corbyn, the veteran leftist leader of the main opposition Labor Party. "This legally questionable action risks escalating further... an already devastating conflict." "Theresa May should have sought parliamentary approval, not trailed after Donald Trump," Corbyn has written to May seeking assurance that there would be no further bombing raids and urged the government to negotiate a pause in the Syrian civil war.

The British, US and French bombings on Saturday followed an alleged chemical weapons attack on the rebel-held town of Douma on April 7. May's government has insisted the punitive strikes were legal, releasing a statement that said they were aimed at alleviating the "extreme humanitarian suffering" of the Syrian people by reducing the chemical weapons capabilities of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime. "The UK is permitted under international law, on an exceptional basis, to take measures in order to alleviate overwhelming humanitarian suffering," the statement said.

It added that it believed the Syrian government had

committed a "war crime and a crime against humanity" with chemical weapons use and that attempts to find a unified international approach through the United Nations had been blocked by Damascus-ally Moscow. May will face questions from MPs on Monday, when parliament reconvenes after a break. Stop the War, a pacifist coalition once chaired by Corbyn, has called a demonstration outside the British parliament on Monday to protest against the strikes. The group said it "strongly condemned" the action and accused May of "sanctioning killing" at Trump's behest.

'Dangerous escalation'

Deploying the armed forces is a prerogative power, meaning the prime minister can launch action without backing from MPs. But after the Conservatives entered office in 2010, the government suggested that since the 2003 vote on Iraq, a convention had emerged that MPs should have a say, except in cases of emergency. British MPs voted against taking military action against Damascus in 2013, in what was widely viewed as an assertion of parliamentary sovereignty on the use of force. David Cameron, who was prime minister in 2013, tweeted on Saturday: "As we have seen in the past, inaction has its consequences." Lawmakers backed action in Iraq in 2014, and again in Syria in 2015, strictly limiting strikes in both countries to targets of the Islamic State jihadist group.

Four British Tornado jets fired Storm Shadow missiles at a Syrian military base suspected of holding chemical weapons components. The strikes at 0100 GMT were 15 miles west of Homs. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said Syria's use of chemical weapons could not be tolerated but questioned whether the strikes would halt their use or contribute to ending the civil war. "This action risks not just further escalating the civil war in Syria but also a dangerous escalation of international tensions," said the leader of the left-wing Scottish National Party, the third-biggest force in the British parliament. Both Syria and Russia have denied all responsibility for the alleged chemical attacks. —AFP