



UK PM makes case for action

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron made his case for military action against Syria yesterday in the face of strong resistance from the opposition and public scepticism.

Cameron told lawmakers recalled from their summer recess that Britain could not stand idle in the face of "one of the most abhorrent uses of chemical weapons in a century".

He said that while he was convinced the Syrian regime was behind the gas attack that is said to have killed hundreds near Damascus last week, there was no "100-percent certainty" and lawmakers had to "make a judgment".

Cameron insisted that launching strikes to degrade the regime's ability to use chemical weapons was "not about taking sides in the Syrian conflict".

But the outcome of the vote hung in the balance after the centre-left opposition Labour Party indicated it would vote against the government's motion, which asks MPs to approve military action in principle -- although a second vote on another day will be required before attacks can be launched.

Under growing pressure from MPs who feared London was rushing into action, the government was forced to agree late Wednesday that Britain would not take part in any military strikes before United Nations inspectors report back on the gas attacks believed to have killed hundreds near Damascus on August 21.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon said the investigators would leave Syria by Saturday and report to him immediately.

A senior Labour source said the government motion does not "mention anything about compelling evidence" that the chemical attack was launched by Assad's forces, and therefore its MPs were likely to vote against the government.

Cameron's centre-right Conservative Party does not have a majority in parliament and they govern in coalition with the far smaller centrist Liberal Democrats.

The government was said to be outraged by Miliband's decision to change his stance on Wednesday -- having previously offered the government conditional backing.

With British lawmakers now facing the prospect of having to vote for a second time on a different day -- possibly early next week -- it raises the possibility that the United States will go it alone with missile strikes, without involvement from Britain, its main military ally.

Haunted by their experience of the war in Iraq, a growing number of MPs -- including some Conservatives -- are reluctant to back British military involvement.

In 2003, parliament gave Labour's then prime minister Tony Blair a mandate to join the US-led offensive in Iraq on the basis of allegations that dictator Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

The weapons never materialised and Britain became embroiled in the war for years.

Any strikes will be symbolic, limited

AFP, Paris

Expected Western strikes on Syria will target the military, intelligence services and possibly sites with symbolic regime links, but will not alter the balance of power in the country, experts say.

The raids, if they go ahead, would be aimed at punishing President Bashar al-Assad's regime and sending him a message rather than wiping out his military capacity and handing the rebels a decisive advantage, they say.

"Specific targets should include the Damascus-area headquarters, barracks and support facilities of the fourth and Republican Guard armoured divisions, two units heavily involved in the bombardment of civilian areas," said Jeffrey

White of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think tank.

"Allied forces should also strike higher-level military and intelligence headquarters and command-and-control facilities associated with military operations around the capital."

Analysts expect to see cruise missiles launched from US and allied submarines, ships and possibly warplanes from outside Syria's territorial waters and airspace.

French General Vincent Desportes, former director of the Ecole de Guerre military training academy, told AFP any strikes would be "more symbolic than military".

"It is a question of reestablishing the West's credibility by doing something. The declared 'red line' cannot be crossed to this degree without

something being done, otherwise all US credibility would be lost, particularly where Iran is concerned."

"But it should not be too much, because if President Assad dies or if the regime collapses, that would lead to a terrible bloodbath, chaos on a national scale. It would be another strategic failure, the like of what was seen in Libya," he added.

Desportes agreed that any strikes would be brief, with symbolic targets that could include government buildings, military command centres, air force bases and even the presidential palace -- as long as it could be ascertained that Assad was not inside.

Strategic leaks from the capitals concerned have already indicated that any strikes will be limited in

time and space.

They will not be powerful enough to weaken the state's military capacity and tilt the balance of power in favour of the rebels, analysts say -- even if, as White believes, they could "encourage fissures within the regime, increase defections and bolster the armed and political opposition".

Christopher Harmer, a naval analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, said a Tomahawk attack would not have the capacity to eliminate the regime's military or chemical weapons capabilities, "nor cause more than a temporary degradation in regime operations".

"Targets chosen to simply punish the Assad regime will have little impact on the strategic outcome," he said.

SYRIA Crisis

Russia to send warships to Mediterranean

AFP, Moscow

Russia "over the next few days" will be sending an anti-submarine ship and a missile cruiser to the Mediterranean as the West prepares for possible strikes against Syria, the Interfax news agency said yesterday.

However, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency said the changes to the country's forces in the region were not linked to the current tensions over Syria.

Most Germans oppose strikes

AFP, Berlin

Most Germans would oppose military action by the West in Syria after an alleged chemical attack blamed on the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, said a poll published yesterday. Fifty-eight percent of those asked said they would reject a military response, while 33 percent said they would back it, according to the survey for ZDF public television which said nine percent were undecided.

Western action difficult: France

AFP, Paris

Western plans for retaliatory action against Syria for an alleged chemical weapons attack are "difficult to develop", the French government spokeswoman said yesterday.

The aim of military action "will not simply be to punish the Syrian regime and prevent it from carrying out a new attack of this type ... but also to seek a way out of this crisis," she added saying the task difficult.

Putin, Rohani hold talks

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani agree that chemical weapon use is "impermissible" but oppose intervention in their ally Syria, the Kremlin said after the two held telephone talks. The two presidents discussed the Syrian conflict "at the initiative of the Iranian side," it said.

US sends fifth destroyer to eastern Med

AFP, Washington

The US Navy has deployed a fifth destroyer to the eastern Mediterranean, a defense official told AFP yesterday, as expectations grow of an imminent strike on Syria.

The USS Stout, a guided missile destroyer, is "in the Mediterranean, heading and moving east" to relieve the Mahan, said the official, who said both ships might remain in place for the time being. Other destroyers in the region criss-cross the Mediterranean and could launch their Tomahawk missiles toward Syria if so directed by US President Barack Obama.



Right, Demonstrators hold up placards during a protest against potential British military involvement in Syria in central London yesterday. Left, UN investigators inspect a alleged chemical attack site in Syria to collect samples.

Strike calls a 'challenge' to UN charter: Russia

AFP, Moscow

Calls for a military intervention in Syria are an "undisputed challenge" to the United Nations charter, the Russian foreign ministry said yesterday.

"Declared plans by some states to inflict a military strike on Syria are an undisputed challenge to the key provisions of the UN charter and other norms of international law," the statement quoted deputy foreign minister Gennady Gatilov as telling UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at a meeting at The Hague on Wednesday.

Russia stressed Wednesday that it was premature to mull any reaction by the United Nations Security Council to an alleged chemical attack near Damascus before the UN team inspecting the site releases its findings.

"At this stage it is necessary to use political and diplomatic instruments to the maximum, first and foremost by letting the UN experts inspecting possible chemical weap-

'Human' intervention needed in Syria: Tutu

AFP, Johannesburg

Nobel peace laureate Desmond Tutu on Wednesday warned against military action in Syria calling instead for "human intervention" and the need for more time for UN inspectors to conclude investigations.

"The violent crises in Syria (and Egypt) are crying out to people across the world: 'please help us!'" the foundation of South Africa's peace icon said in a statement.

The troubles "require human intervention, not military intervention", he said.

"UN chemical weapons inspectors are on the ground in Syria, but need more time to finish their work."

"We need to talk, to avoid further bloodshed, not to fight."

Britain, France and the United States have been spearheading calls



Bin Laden doctor to be retried

BBC ONLINE

Officials in Pakistan have overturned the jail sentence and ordered a retrial of a doctor who helped the CIA in their search for Osama Bin Laden.

Shakil Afridi was charged with treason and tried under the tribal justice system for running a fake vaccination programme to gather information.

He was jailed for 33 years in May 2012 and has been held since then at Peshawar Central Jail. Bin Laden was killed by US forces in Abbottabad in May 2011.

His killing created a crisis in relations between the US and Pakistan, which felt the covert operation was a violation of its sovereignty.

The sentence was quashed and a retrial ordered because the previous judge had exceeded his authority in handing down the sentence, a judicial official at Pakistan's Frontier.

The previous trial had been heard by an official with the status equivalent to a magistrate. The order issued by the commission says that the new trial must be heard by an official with the status of a judge.

Afridi will stay in prison until the retrial is concluded. No date has been set for the trial.

Shortly after the raid on Bin Laden's house, Afridi was arrested for conspiring against the state of Pakistan.

Although he was accused of working with the CIA he was eventually jailed for collaborating with a militant group. Correspondents say that the group named had actually kidnapped him on one occasion.

Afridi was not present at his trial. His swift conviction came in a court outside Pakistan's normal jurisdiction in the semi-autonomous tribal areas, which do not necessarily follow standard judicial procedures.

He has consistently maintained that he did not know the target of the CIA operation was Osama Bin Laden.

US officials spoke out against his arrest and sentencing and called for his release. But Pakistan maintained that any government would have taken similar measures.



FAKE DAIRY ALERT New Zealand wants answers

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand yesterday demanded answers about how a false test reading triggered a botulism scare for dairy giant Fonterra that forced global product recalls, describing the episode as a costly embarrassment.

Officials sounded the alarm earlier this month after tests showed batches of whey powder produced by Fonterra were contaminated with the potentially fatal bug clostridium botulinum.

Infant formula was pulled off shelves from China to Saudi Arabia as New Zealand's reputation for producing the gold-standard foodstuffs that command top prices in Asia took a battering.

But it was revealed on Wednesday that subsequent tests had proved the contaminant was in fact a non-toxic bacterium called clostridium sporogenes and there had never been any danger to consumers.

Earthlings are Martians!

AFP, Paris

Life on Earth was kick-started thanks to a key mineral deposited by a meteorite from Mars, according to a novel theory aired yesterday.

The vital ingredient was an oxidised mineral form of the element molybdenum, which helped prevent carbon molecules -- the building blocks of life -- from degrading into a tar-like goo.

The idea comes from Steven Benner, a professor at the Westheimer Institute for Science and Technology in Gainesville, Florida, who was to present it at an international conference of geochemists in Florence, Italy.

"It's only when molybdenum becomes highly oxidized that it is able to influence how early life formed," Benner said in a press release.

"This form of molybdenum couldn't have been available on Earth at the time life first began, because three billion years ago the surface of the Earth had very little oxygen, but Mars did."

In this violent epoch of the Solar System, the

Iran appoints first-ever spokeswoman

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Foreign Ministry has appointed career diplomat Marzieh Afkham as its new spokesperson, the first time the Islamic republic has named a woman to the position, reports said yesterday.

With nearly three decades of service at the ministry, Afkham has been director of its media and public diplomacy department since 2010, Iranian media reported.

"She is seasoned and experienced in the field of media diplomacy," incumbent spokesman Abbas Araqchi told the ISNA news agency, announcing the appointment.

Araqchi had said on Tuesday another woman, without naming her, was being groomed to become the Iran's first-ever ambassador.

Afkham's appointment comes as moderate Iranian President Hassan Rowhani has reportedly asked officials to appoint women to high ranking posts.



MAGICAL CHANDELIER



A pair of Danish artists have created a magical chandelier that turns a room into a forest using a trick of the light. Vast leafy shadows are thrown onto the walls as light shines through the mirrored sculpture, while different types of woodland can be created by turning the dimmer switch up and down.

Yugoslav war crimes court removes judge

AFP, The Hague

The UN's Yugoslav war crimes court has for the first time removed a judge from a trial, because a leaked letter he wrote appeared to show he was biased, it said yesterday.

The shock removal of Danish judge Frederik Harhoff from the trial of Serbian ultra nationalist Vojislav Seselj came after his deeply controversial letter was leaked to the media in June.

In the private letter that Harhoff wrote to colleagues, he criticised a "departure from the previous 'set practice' of convicting military commanders", said the court, citing arguments made by Seselj, who had sought the Danish judge's removal over the letter.

Harhoff also claimed that the tribunal's president, US judge Theodor Meron, had pressured other judges to acquit leading Croatian and Serbian officers, possibly under pressure from the US and Israel.

ICJY spokeswoman Magda Spalinska told AFP that it was now up to the court's vice president to decide how Seselj's case will proceed.