

# 'US strike' hit IS poison gas depot, scores killed

## Accuses Syria regime, says militants have chem weapons; Washington denies

AGENCIES  
The Syrian army said an air strike late on Wednesday by the US-led coalition hit poison gas supplies belonging to Islamic State, releasing a toxic substance that killed "hundreds", but the coalition denied carrying out raids in the area.

A statement by the army, flashed by Syrian state TV yesterday, said the incident in the eastern Deir al-Zor province proved that Islamic State and al-Qaeda-linked militants "possess chemical weapons".

The report could not immediately be independently verified.

US Air Force Colonel John Dorrian, a spokesman for the coalition, said it had carried out no air strikes in that area at that time.

Meanwhile, in an exclusive interview with AFP, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad said a suspected chemical weapons attack, that killed 87 people including many children, was a "fabrication" to justify a US strike on his forces.

The embattled leader said his firepower had not been affected by the attack ordered by US President Donald Trump, but acknowledged further strikes were possible.

US launched 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian air base last week. Syria and its ally Russia deny Damascus carried out any such chemical attack. Moscow has said the poison gas in that incident belonged to rebels.

Assad insisted his forces had turned over all their chemical weapons stocks years ago

and would never use the banned arms. "Definitely, 100 percent for us, it's fabrication," he said of the incident.

Pentagon chief Jim Mattis said Tuesday there was "no doubt" the Syrian regime was behind the chemical attack.

Images of the aftermath, showing victims convulsing and foaming at the mouth, sent shockwaves around the world.

The US strike on the Syrian air base was the first time Washington has deliberately and directly targeted the Syrian government.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump said Wednesday said the United States

wants to improve ties with Russia from their current "all-time low" over Syria, as Moscow dug in to defend its ally in Damascus.

But that prospect appeared remote, with Trump's secretary of state Rex Tillerson getting a frosty reception in Moscow, and Russia using its UN Security Council veto to swat down a US-backed resolution demanding Syrian cooperation in probing last week's suspected chemical attack.

It was the eighth time that Russia has used its veto power to block action directed at Damascus. China opted to abstain, a move Trump praised.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said the veto "puts Russia on the wrong side of the argument," while French President Francois Hollande warned Russia it "bears a heavy responsibility" for continuing to protect Assad.

Assad says chem attack '100 percent fabrication' Russia vetoes UN resolution on attack, China abstains



# 2004 Beslan school massacre

## Russia mishandled situation: EU court

AFP, Strasbourg  
The European Court of Human Rights yesterday ruled there were "serious failings" in Russia's handling of the Beslan school siege by Chechen rebels in 2004 in which over 330 people were killed, many of them children.

The court said although Russian authorities had information that an attack was being planned on a school in North Ossetia, they failed to do enough to disrupt the plot and had not sufficiently protected the hostages.

Russia reacted furiously to the judgement, saying it was "absolutely unacceptable".

The school was stormed on September 1, 2004 by militants demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from the war-torn republic of Chechnya.

The attackers herded 1,100 people including 800 children into a gymnasium and rigged the building with explosives.

After three days of fruitless negotiations, explosions in the school prompted Russian security forces to storm the gymnasium.

A total of 184 children were among the 334 dead as the siege came to a bloody end.

Russian authorities argue they took the best course of action faced with armed extremists, but many of the survivors and their relatives believe the security services were to

blame for the firefight.

The court found that through its actions, the Russian state had violated Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which guarantees a right to life.

There was an additional violation in the use of "lethal force by security forces".

The claimants in the case say the authorities were primarily seeking to eliminate the attackers with little care taken to avoid deaths of hostages.

Their lawyers have particularly criticised the lack of in-depth autopsies on the bodies of 116 victims found buried in the gymnasium.

# S Sudan violence amounts to 'genocide': UK

AFP, Entebbe  
Targeted killings of specific ethnic groups in South Sudan's civil war amount to "genocide", according to Britain's International Development Minister Priti Patel.

"It's tribal, it's absolutely tribal, so on that basis it's genocide," Patel told reporters in Uganda on Wednesday, according to a ministry press officer travelling with her.

Patel was returning from a visit to South Sudan where people have "experienced trauma and horror none of us can comprehend", she told AFP in a separate interview.

Civil war erupted in South Sudan in 2013 after a power struggle between President Salva Kiir -- who is ethnic Dinka -- and his former deputy Riek Machar from the Nuer community.

The Dinka and Nuer are the two largest ethnic groups in South Sudan and with their history of bloody rivalry, fighting quickly pitted the two against each other.

However the conflict has also drawn in the country's myriad smaller groups, either taking sides with the government or the rebels or fighting each other for the upper hand in local conflicts over land or other issues.

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# Trump takes U-turn again

REUTERS, Washington  
After less than three months in office, President Donald Trump has abruptly shifted his stance on an array of foreign policy issues from the US relationship with Russia and China to the value of the Nato alliance.

Trump, who ran for the White House on a pledge to shake up the status quo in Washington, repeatedly lashed out at China during the campaign, accusing Beijing of being a "grand champion" of currency manipulation.

Candidate Trump also dismissed the Nato military alliance as obsolete and said he hoped to build warmer ties with Russia.

But at a White House news conference and in a newspaper interview on Wednesday, he offered starkly different views on those issues, saying his relationship with Moscow was souring while ties with Beijing were improving. He also lavished praise on Nato, saying it was adapting to changing global threats.

"I said it was obsolete. It's no longer obsolete," Trump said as he stood at a news conference alongside NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in the White House East

Room on Wednesday. The reversals on Russia and Nato could reassure US allies in Europe who were rattled by Trump's overtures toward Moscow during the campaign. But the president's talk of "bonding" with Chinese President Xi Jinping could sow confusion in Asia, where US allies are fearful of a rising China.

Trump's apparent shifts toward a more conventional foreign policy came amid infighting within his administration that has lately seen a decline in the influence of political operatives, mainly his chief strategist, Steve Bannon.

Six months ago, candidate Trump suggested he was eager for an alliance with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"If he says great things about me, I'm going to say great things about him," Trump said last September.

On Wednesday, however, Trump said he had growing concerns about Russia's support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"We may be at an all-time low in terms of a relationship with Russia," said Trump, who ordered the firing of US cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield last week to punish Assad for trade.

The improving ties with Beijing were underscored when Trump told the Wall Street Journal in an interview on Wednesday that he would not declare China a currency manipulator as he had pledged to do on his first day in office.

Trump, a former real estate developer, took office in January as a government novice whose foreign policy mantra during was a vow to keep America safe and build up the U.S. military.

Christine Wormuth, former undersecretary of defense in the Obama administration, said Trump had a "steep learning curve" on foreign policy when he came into office but that it was beginning to even out.

"He's starting to have a more nuanced and deeper understanding of a lot of issues," said Wormuth, now a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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## CHINA, NATO, RUSSIA POLICIES

Says Nato is 'no longer obsolete'

Backs down from calling China a currency manipulator

Says US-Russia ties at all-time low



Donald Trump with Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg.

suspected use of poison gas in Syria's civil war.

While criticizing Russia on Wednesday, Trump said he and Xi had bonded during the Chinese president's visit to the Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, where they dined together with their wives and held talks.

Ahead of that visit, Trump had predicted "difficult" discussions on

## TILLERSON ON US POLLS MEDDLING

# Russian role fairly well-established

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK  
Russia's meddling in last year's US presidential election has been "fairly well-established", Rex Tillerson has said, following talks with his counterpart in Moscow.

The Secretary of State described Russia's alleged involvement in the 2016 vote as a "serious issue" and "one that we know" about.

But Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov responded that "not a single fact has been confirmed".

The two diplomats spoke at a US-Russia summit, where they discussed relations with North Korea, air safety, and the situation in Syria. Tillerson said there is a "low level of trust" between the two countries, and many issues on which they disagreed. Allegations of Russian interference on Wednesday appeared to be just one of them.

All seventeen American intelligence agencies have reported evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. A joint report from the CIA, FBI and NSA claims orders for a hacking and propaganda against candidate Hillary Clinton came from the "highest levels" of the Russian government.

Officials from all three agencies determined Russian hackers accessed both parties' campaign servers and released damaging information about the Democratic National Party.

# Trump gave Syria attack order 'during dessert'

AFP, Washington  
US President Donald Trump gave the order to strike Syria with dozens of cruise missiles "during dessert" with visiting Chinese leader Xi Jinping, he said in an interview aired Wednesday.

"We had finished dinner. We're now having dessert. And we had the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you've ever seen and President Xi was enjoying it," Trump told the Fox Business television network.

"And I was given the message from the generals that the ships are locked and loaded, what do you do?" Trump said. "And we made a determination to do it, so the missiles were on the way."

"And I said, 'Mr. President, let me explain something to you' -- this was during dessert -- 'we've just fired 59 missiles.'"

Trump said Xi "paused for 10 seconds and then asked the interpreter to say it again. I didn't think that was a good sign."

But then, Trump said, Xi responded that "anybody that was so brutal and uses gases to do that to young children and babies, it's OK.... He was OK with it. He was OK."

Trump had been hosting Xi at his private Florida resort Mar-a-Lago on April 6. The US missiles struck a Syrian air base in retaliation for Syria's alleged chemical attack on a rebel-held town, killing 87 civilians, many of them children.

Trump, in his interview, said all 59 missiles fired hit their targets and called the display of military prowess "unbelievable," "amazing," "incredible," "brilliant" and "genius."

Trump regularly spends his weekends at his Mar-a-Lago resort, which his staff has nicknamed the "Southern White House."

Members of the club pay a \$200,000 fee, which gives access to its amenities and its eateries.



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Erdogan supporters demonstrate for the upcoming referendum near a campaign point in Istanbul, Turkey, yesterday. The 'Yes' and 'No' camps are increasingly polarised as the countdown starts for Turkey's key referendum on Sunday on expanding President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers.

# PEACEKEEPING FORCE UN to shut down Haiti mission

AFP, United Nations  
The United Nations Security Council yesterday agreed to shut down the peacekeeping mission in Haiti after 13 years and replace it with a smaller police-only force.

The council unanimously adopted a resolution that will end the mission known as MINUSTAH by October 15.

The decision provided a boost to the new US administration's hopes of cutting back its financial contributions to UN peacekeeping.

The new mission's police force will also be drawn down over two years as the Haitian police is built up in the poor Caribbean nation.

# Detained 'Islamist' cleared over Dortmund blasts

AFP, Dortmund  
German federal prosecutors yesterday said they had cleared the sole suspect in custody for a bomb attack against the Borussia Dortmund football team bus of involvement.

The announcement marked a setback for investigators, who described the three blasts late Tuesday as a "terrorist" act and said they are focusing on suspects in the "Islamist spectrum".

"The investigation has not found evidence that the suspect took part in the attack," the prosecutors office said in a brief statement.

It said it was nevertheless seeking an arrest warrant for a 26-year-old Iraqi national, identified only as Abdul Beset A, for alleged ties to the Islamic State group.

Investigators had zeroed in on two suspects believed to belong to the large jihadist scene in the Ruhr region, after three identical letters claiming responsibility for the attack were found at the scene. Only Abdul Beset A was detained.

# Muslim US judge found dead in NY

CNN ONLINE  
Sheila Abdus-Salaam, the first African-American woman appointed to the New York Court of Appeals, was found dead in the Hudson River. She was 65.

Police responded to a 911 call about a woman in the water of the Hudson around 1:45 pm Wednesday. They found an unconscious and unresponsive woman, who was later pronounced dead and identified as Abdus-Salaam.

The medical examiner will determine the cause of death and the incident is under investigation, according to a statement from the New York Police Department.

Abdus-Salaam had been an associate justice on the state's Court of Appeals since her confirmation in 2013.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who appointed her to the state's highest court, hailed her as a "trailblazing jurist whose life in public service was in pursuit of a more fair and more just New York for all."

She had been reported missing by her husband on Tuesday, reported CNN affiliate WCBS in New York.

