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U.N. inspectors visit site of alleged chemical attack in Syria after coming under sniper fire



View Photo Gallery — In Syria, activists accuse government of chemical attack: Syrian activists have accused the government of launching a massive chemical weapons attack that killed scores of people in the Damascus suburbs.

By Liz Sly, [E-mail the writer](#)

BEIRUT — U.N. chemical weapons inspectors on Monday visited one of the Damascus suburbs that was allegedly hit last week with poison gas in an attack that left hundreds of people dead and increased the likelihood of U.S. military intervention in the region's bloodiest conflict.

The visit came as Washington's Western allies indicated that they would back U.S. military action against Syria in response to the alleged attack, even without a U.N. mandate, intensifying speculation that some form of military intervention is imminent.

Graphic



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The convoy carrying the inspectors came under sniper fire in its first attempt to access the affected town of Moadamiya, and the lead vehicle was hit, U.N. officials said. But the team was able to regroup and complete the journey to the rebel-held suburb, one of three on the outskirts of Damascus that were targeted in Wednesday's attack.

[Video live-streamed from a field hospital](#) showed members of the U.N. chemical weapons investigation team, dressed in

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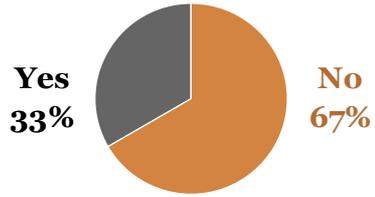
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blue helmets and bulletproof vests, examining patients and talking to doctors who had treated some of the victims.

“This is the effect of chemicals,” one man, who appeared to be a doctor, explained to one of the inspectors, who took notes on a clipboard.

In New York, U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq said the inspectors had a “very productive” day, collected “some samples” and intended to continue their fieldwork Tuesday. Haq stressed that the inspectors do not have a mandate to assign responsibility for a chemical weapons attack, only to establish whether one has occurred.

Russia has repeatedly blocked action against Syria at the U.N. Security Council, leaving the Obama administration with few options palatable to a president who has repeatedly vowed to conduct foreign policy through international institutions.

But the powerful evidence that chemical weapons were used in rebel-held strongholds of Damascus last week —

including multiple videos of children gasping, drooling and dying by the dozens — has abruptly shifted the discussion on whether military intervention is an option. Doctors Without Borders, the French relief agency, said three hospitals it supports in the afflicted areas had treated 3,600 patients who were displaying neurotoxic symptoms, of whom 355 died.

The Syrian government has accused the rebels of responsibility and says some of its troops also have been affected by an unspecified nerve gas.

But Secretary of State John F. Kerry pointed the finger squarely at President Bashar al-Assad’s forces on Monday, saying that the use of chemical weapons was “undeniable” and that the Syrian government’s decision to allow inspections was “too late to be credible.”

The Obama administration has already said it has evidence that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons on several occasions, but the scale of this attack, if confirmed, would unequivocally cross a “red line” set by the president a year ago.

On Monday the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Turkey said in separate interviews that they would be prepared to back U.S. action outside the parameters of a U.N. mandate.

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@AnupKaple



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@LizSly

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