

[Press release: Foreign Secretary responds to reports of chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria](#)

Reports of a large scale chemical weapons attack in Douma on Saturday causing high numbers of casualties are deeply disturbing. It is truly horrific to think that many of the victims were reportedly families seeking refuge from airstrikes in underground shelters.

Despite Russia's promise in 2013 to ensure Syria would abandon all of its chemical weapons, international investigators mandated by the UN Security Council have found the Asad regime responsible for using poison gas in at least four separate attacks since 2014. These latest reports must urgently be investigated and the international community must respond. Investigators from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons looking into reports of chemical weapons use in Syria have our full support. Russia must not yet again try to obstruct these investigations.

Should it be confirmed that the regime has used chemical weapons again, it would be yet another appalling example of the Asad regime's brutality and blatant disregard for both the Syrian people and its legal obligations not to use chemical weapons.

We condemn the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere. We are in close touch with our allies following these latest reports. Those responsible for the use of chemical weapons have lost all moral integrity and must be held to account.

[Press release: FCO statement on reports of a chemical weapons attack in Syria](#)

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An urgent investigation is needed and the international community must respond. We call on the Assad regime and its backers, Russia and Iran, to stop the violence against innocent civilians.

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[Press release: Home Office announces plans for Offensive Weapons Bill to tackle serious violence](#)

The government will also make it a criminal offence to possess corrosive substances in a public place and publicly consult on extending stop and search powers to enable the police to search for and seize acid from people carrying it in public without good reason.

The new Offensive Weapons Bill, which will be brought forward within weeks, would also make it illegal to possess certain offensive weapons like zombie knives and knuckle-dusters in private.

The commitment of new legislation will form part of the government's Serious Violence Strategy, which will be launched tomorrow.

It will mark a major shift in the government's response to knife crime and gun crime and strike a balance between prevention and robust law enforcement.

Other measures which the Home Office intends to bring forward within weeks include:

- Stopping knives being sent to residential addresses after they are bought online;
- Changing the legal definition for threatening with an offensive weapon to make prosecutions easier;

- Banning the possession of a knife on a further education premises;
- Banning rapid firing rifles, and certain powerful firearms and bump stocks, which increase a rifles' rate of fire;
- Updating the definition of a flick knife to reflect changing weapon designs.

Home Secretary Amber Rudd said:

This government has always stood for law and order and to tackle violent crime effectively, robust legislation and powerful law enforcement must be in place.

That's why we will introduce a new Offensive Weapons Bill that includes a new offence of possessing acid in public without good reason, prevents sales of acids to under 18s and stops knives being sent to people's homes when bought online.

I see no good reason why any young person should be carrying a corrosive substance in the street, so I am also announcing that we will consult on extending stop and search powers to include acid. Stop and search is a vital policing tool and officers will always have the government's full support to use these powers properly.

The legislation will include a minimum custodial sentence for those convicted of a second or subsequent offence of possession of a corrosive substance in a public place.

The new offence of possessing certain offensive weapons in private would ensure that in future where the police find a zombie knife, for example, in someone's home they can arrest and charge the owner with this proposed offence and remove the offensive weapon from the owner.

The Home Office has also added sulphuric acid to the list of regulated explosives precursors that come under the Poisons Act 1972. This will mean that members of the public will require a licence to acquire, possess and use the substance.

The Serious Violence Strategy will set out the importance of pursuing those who commit serious violent crime through effective law enforcement and ensuring that the criminal justice system is effective and responsive, especially for victims.

It will also examine how social media usage can drive violent crime and focus on building on the progress and relationships made with social media providers and the police to identify where we can take further preventative action relevant to tackling serious violence.

When the strategy is launched tomorrow, the Home Secretary is expected to call on social media companies to do more to tackle gang material hosted on their sites and to make an explicit reference to not allowing violent gang material including music and video on their platforms.

The Home Secretary is also due to host a round-table for civic leaders, including the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and Mayor of London, charities and organisations which campaign against serious violence ahead of the launch.

[Press release: Rare Rubens portrait at risk of leaving the UK](#)

Arts Minister Michael Ellis has placed a temporary export bar on a painting by Sir Peter Paul Rubens to provide an opportunity to keep it in the country.

Head of an African Man Wearing a Turban is one of the few existing examples of artwork from the 17th century that records an African man in Europe. It is at risk of being exported unless a buyer can be found to match the asking price of £7,695,860.

The oil sketch was used by Rubens in his 1609 portrayal of Balthazar in Adoration of the Magi, which depicts the giving of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus.

Rubens is one of the pre-eminent painters of the 17th century and among the most influential artists of the Flemish Baroque tradition. He was knighted by Charles I and while living in London also painted the masterpiece ceiling of the Banqueting House – one of the most famous works from the golden age of painting.

Head of an African Man Wearing a Turban, which has been in the UK for more than 100 years, is painted on a list of accounts written in Italian. This has led experts to believe that it may have been completed in Italy and brought back to Antwerp.

The fact that it is on paper, rather than his favoured panel, suggests that this is a unique record of an individual the painter encountered, rather than of a posed model. It is one of approximately 30 oil sketches completed by Rubens in British public collections.

Arts Minister Michael Ellis said:

Rubens was one of the great artists of the golden age of painting. This powerful sketch is not only a stunning example of his work,

but hugely important as a rare representation of an African man in Europe at this time. I hope that a buyer can be found so that this outstanding item can be kept in the UK for future generations to enjoy.

The decision to defer the export licence follows a recommendation by the [Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest \(RCEWA\)](#), administered by The Arts Council.

RCEWA member Aidan Weston-Lewis said:

This magnificent portrait study of a North African is a supreme example of Rubens's gifts as a painter from life. With the portrait of Juan de Pareja by Velázquez in the Metropolitan Museum in New York – which was exported from the UK in 1971 amid much controversy – it is also the most positive and dignified representation of a black person in 17th-century European art. On both counts it would make a transformative addition to a public collection in this country and its permanent export would, like Juan de Pareja, long be regretted.

The RCEWA made its recommendation on the grounds of the paintings outstanding aesthetic importance and significance for the study of Rubens' artistic practice. It was felt that the presence of this work in a public collection would help enhance a sense of shared history and heritage and would boost a commitment to serving a more diverse audience.

The decision on the export licence application for the Head of an African Man Wearing a Turban will be deferred until 5 July 2018. This may be extended until 5 January 2019 if a serious intention to raise funds to purchase it is made at the recommended price of £7,695,860.

Offers from public bodies for less than the recommended price through the private treaty sale arrangements, where appropriate, may also be considered by Michael Ellis. Such purchases frequently offer substantial financial benefit to a public institution wishing to acquire the item.

Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the Head of an African Man Wearing a Turban should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.

An image of the painting can be downloaded [here](#).

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Notes to editors

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the oil sketch should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.
2. Provenance: E. Christopher Norris (1907-1987), Polesden Lacey, Great Bookham, nr. Dorking, Surrey; His sale, London, Sotheby's, May 23, 1951, lot 96 (unsold); His posthumous sale, London, Christie's, December 11, 1987, lot 19 (unsold); Private collection, England, until 2004; Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd, London; Private collection, England
3. Details of the oil sketch are as follows: The Head of an African Man Wearing a Turban Oil on paper, laid down on panel, 54 x 39 cm (excluding a modern strip of paint of approximately 8 cm in width that has been added at left)
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by The Arts Council, which advises the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.
5. The Arts Council champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. It supports a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. www.artscouncil.org.uk.