

Russia and West clash over Syria chemical weapons sanctions

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-07 01:55

NEW YORK: Syria and close ally Russia clashed with the US and other nations over a Western initiative to suspend Syria's voting rights in the global chemical weapons watchdog for failing to provide details of three chemical attacks in 2017 that investigators blamed on the Bashar Assad regime.

The confrontation in the UN Security Council foreshadowed a showdown when the 193 member states of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) meet in The Hague, Netherlands, in April to consider a French-drafted measure, on behalf of 46 countries, to suspend Syria's "rights and privileges" in the body.

The French proposal was a response to Syria's failure to meet a 90-day deadline set in July by the OPCW's executive council for Damascus to declare the nerve agent sarin and chlorine, which OPCW investigators said last April were dropped by the Syrian air force on the central town of Latamneh in late March 2017.

The Western effort reflects a much broader effort to obtain accountability for Syrian chemical attacks and highlight claims that the Assad regime is secretly continuing its chemical weapons program.

Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention in September 2013, pressed by Russia after a deadly chemical weapons attack that the West blamed on Damascus.

By August 2014, the Assad regime declared that the destruction of its chemical weapons was completed. But Syria's initial declaration of its chemical stockpiles and chemical weapons production sites has remained in dispute.

Ireland's UN ambassador, Geraldine Byrne Nason, a new council member, said it was "deeply disturbing" that the OPCW still cannot determine whether the initial declaration was accurate or complete because of gaps and inconsistencies. She said the problems are not "minor" as some would portray, alluding to Russia.

"Over those seven years, the number of issues that need to be addressed has expanded from five to 19," Byrne Nason said. "There have been 17 amendments to Syria's declaration including the addition of a production facility, four research and development centers, and doubling of the amount of declared agents and chemicals."

In addition, she said, there are issues related to "hundreds of tons of missing agents and munitions reported destroyed" before Syria joined the

chemical convention as well as recent reports of a production facility that Damascus declared as never having been used, "where there is clear evidence to the contrary."

Norwegian Ambassador Mona Juul, another new council member, also expressed concern at Syria's failure to explain an unnamed chemical that can be used in chemical weapons but also has non-weapons uses. It was detected at the Barzah facilities of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center.

Russia's deputy UN ambassador, Dmitry Polyansky, again accused OPCW investigators of being "unscrupulous" and alleged they used "forgeries" and "manipulations" to blame Syria.

He called the chemical watchdog "seriously ill with politicization." And he accused a number of unnamed countries of "playing this 'chemical card' to step up pressure on the Syrian government that they failed to overthrow in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring."

As for the initial Syrian declaration, Polyansky said Damascus was not "an extraordinary case," pointing to amended declarations by Western countries including France and Germany as well as Libya. He accused Western delegations of trying to "inflate agitation" around Syria.

French Ambassador Nicolas De Riviere expressed regret at "the false accusations of those who seek to discredit OPCW" and its findings about Syria's attacks.

"There is simply the reality of the facts," he said. "We all know them: the regime used weapons of war prohibited by international law against its own population, and since then we have seen chemical weapons re-emerge and become commonplace in Syria and elsewhere."

British Ambassador Barbara Woodward said OPCW investigators, alone and initially with a UN team, determined Syria used chemical weapons on at least six occasions.

"These are not hypothetical issues for the thousands of Syrian civilians who have suffered the horrifying effects on the body of nerve agents and chlorine," she said.

Syria's deputy foreign minister and former UN ambassador, Bashar Ja'afari, accused some unnamed Western nations of using the OPCW "as a platform to fabricate allegations and then justify an assault and aggression on Syria."

The aim, he said, is "to frame the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons and exonerate the terrorists and the sponsors ... and give them the necessary means to escape through the occupied Golan area through Israel to the capitals of Western states where they can live."

Russia's Polyansky said Syria could not meet the OPCW's anti-Syria demands on Latamneh because it "simply doesn't have" the chemical weapons and facilities the organization is seeking.

“Hopefully, the majority of delegations at the member states’ conference in April will reject this provocation, and the West-initiated decision, which is ‘punitive’ by nature, will not pass,” he said.

US deputy ambassador Richard Mills said neither the Security Council nor the world “is fooled” by Russia’s accelerated campaign to discredit the OPCW.

He urged council members to call on all countries to support the French draft against Syria in April “aimed at promoting accountability for the Assad regime’s actions.”

“It is time that the Syrian people, and indeed all the globe’s people, be allowed to live in a world free of the threat of chemical weapons,” he said.



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Author:

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Wed, 2021-01-06 19:06

RABAT: Rabat, Jan 6, 2021 Agence France Presse: Morocco on Wednesday authorized for emergency use the coronavirus vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford, the health ministry said.

The North African nation, with some 35 million people, has recorded over 447,000 Covid-19 cases including 7,618 deaths, according to the latest official count.

The government says it has ordered 65 million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccines as well as from the Chinese firm Sinopharm.

It says preparations for rolling out the vaccine are "very advanced" but has not given a date for injections to start.

The authorities re-imposed a nationwide curfew and other restrictive measures on December 21 in a bid to slow the spread of the virus.



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[Israeli firm in Gaza extracts drinking water from air](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-06 01:40

GAZA CITY: The densely populated Gaza Strip has long lacked sufficient drinking water, but a new project helps ease the shortage with a solar-powered process to extract potable water straight from the air.

Unusually, the project operating in the Islamist-run Palestinian enclave, which has been blockaded by Israel since 2007, is the brainchild of a Russian-Israeli billionaire, Michael Mirilashvili.

The company he heads, Watergen, has developed the atmospheric water generators that can produce 5,000 to 6,000 liters (1,300 to more than 1,500 gallons) of drinking water per day, depending on the air's humidity.

With just a few machines operating in Gaza, Watergen is far from meeting demand for the 2 million people who live in the crowded coastal enclave wedged between Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea.

"But, it's a start," said Fathi Sheikh Khalil, an engineer with the Palestinian civil society group Damour, which operates one of the machines because Israeli firms cannot work in Gaza.

The strip, plagued by severe economic woes and regular power shortages, has also been facing a worsening water crisis for years.

Its overused aquifer has been degraded by saltwater intrusion and contaminated by pollutants, making most available water salty and dangerous to drink and forcing the import of bottled water.

Only 3 percent of Gaza's own water meets international standards, according to the United Nations, which had in 2012 predicted that ecological pressures would have made Gaza "unliveable" by now.

Multiple studies have linked rising rates of kidney stones and high incidence of diarrhea in Gaza to the consumption of substandard water.

Several players are working to solve the water shortage, including the European Union, which is supporting a massive seawater desalination plant.

Watergen's offices are located in a glass tower in Tel Aviv, some 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Gaza.

Mirilashvili bought Watergen after moving to Israel in 2009, and the company has since exported its machines to more than 80 countries.

The company CEO and president has a colorful personal history, including time spent in a Russian prison following a kidnapping conviction in a trial the European Court of Justice later found was flawed.

Mirilashvili told AFP that when he learned about Gaza's water crisis, he immediately wanted to help.

"Our goal was that everyone on Earth could be supplied with drinkable water ... It was immediately clear that we had to help our neighbors first."

Israel tightly controls imports to Gaza and Mirilashvili acknowledged that getting his machines approved "took some time."

Israel's army "liked the idea, but needed to check the equipment," he said.

Watergen's technology is suited to Gaza because it runs on solar panels, an asset in the enclave where the one power plant, which requires imported fuel, lacks the capacity to meet demand.

Mirilashvili lamented that he cannot see his machines at work, as Israelis are forbidden from entering the strip.

Watergen has donated two machines, which cost \$61,000 each, to Gaza.

A third machine was sent to the strip by the Arava Institute for Environmental Research, based on a kibbutz in southern Israel.

One of the machines, a metal cube that roars as it runs, is located at the town hall in Khan Younis in southern Gaza.

After capturing humidity, the machine condenses it into water and then filters it into instantly drinkable water.

When the air's humidity level is above 65 percent, Watergen's machines can produce about 5,000 liters of drinking water per day, said Khalil of the Palestinian group Damour.

An additional 1,000 liters can be produced when the humidity level exceeds 90 percent.

Some of the water is consumed by city hall employees and some transported to a local hospital for patients with kidney problems, Khalil said.

"One or two machines won't change anything," he told AFP. But "it shows there is a solution."



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[UN chief recommends Libya cease-fire monitors be based in Sirte](#)

Wed, 2021-01-06 01:35

NEW YORK: Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is recommending that international monitors be deployed to Libya under a UN umbrella to observe the October cease-fire agreement from a base in the strategic city of Sirte, the gateway to the country's major oil fields and export terminals.

The UN chief said in an interim report to the Security Council on proposed cease-fire monitoring arrangements circulated Monday that an advance team should be sent to Libya's capital Tripoli as a first step to "provide the foundations for a scalable United Nations cease-fire monitoring mechanism based in Sirte."

Oil-rich Libya was plunged into chaos after a 2011 NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi and split the country between a UN-supported government in Tripoli and rival authorities based in country's east, each side backed by an array of local militias as well as regional and foreign powers.

In April 2019, east-based commander Khalifa Haftar and his forces, backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, launched an offensive to try and capture Tripoli. His campaign collapsed after Turkey stepped up its military support of the UN-supported government with hundreds of troops and thousands of Syrian mercenaries.

The October cease-fire agreement called for the withdrawal of all armed forces from conflict lines and the departure of all mercenaries and foreign fighters within three months.

Guterres gave few details of the monitoring mechanism but said the Joint Military Commission, with five representatives from each of the rival sides, "has requested unarmed, non-uniformed individual international monitors to be deployed under the auspices of the United Nations." They would work alongside joint monitoring teams from the rival Tripoli and eastern governments "for specific monitoring and verification tasks," he said.

"The Libyan parties have also conveyed their firm position that no deployment of foreign forces of any kind, including United Nations uniformed personnel, should occur on Libyan territory," the secretary-general said. But the commission welcomed offers of potential support to the monitoring mechanism from regional organizations including the African Union, European Union and Arab League under UN auspices.

According to the military commission's concept, "the United Nations would be expected to provide a nimble and scalable team of impartial international monitors to carry out monitoring" in the Sirte area, Guterres said.

In the commission's view, he said, they would "initially provide oversight and report compliance along the coastal road on the removal of military forces and mercenaries, the deployment of the joint police force, the clearance of explosive remnants of war, boobytraps and mines."

"As soon as conditions permit, they would expand their monitoring work to the Abu Grein-Bin Jawad-Sawknah triangle, and possibly beyond," Guterres said.

Guterres reiterated the UN's commitment to assist and support the Joint Military Commission in operationalizing the cease-fire agreement, warning that the current delays risk failure to meet the timeline.

He pointed to military activities by forces backing both sides, as well as military cargo flights, impeding the agreement's implementation.

"A lasting cease-fire in Libya needs above all else the buy-in of the parties and of ordinary Libyans," the secretary-general said., and it also requires support from regional and international parties.

He urged implementation of the widely broken UN arms embargo.

Guterres said the deployment of monitors under the umbrella of the UN political mission in Libya known as UNSMIL to the area around Sirte would require funding and personnel from UN member states.

Tunisia's UN Ambassador Tarek Ladeb, the current council president, said Monday he hopes a resolution on a cease-fire monitoring mechanism will be adopted before council members discuss UNSMIL on Jan. 28.



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Key players to meet virtually to push for Libya cease-fire
Reading stabber fought in Libya before claiming UK asylum

[Families rejoice as GCC Summit cements the ties that bind Gulf countries](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-05 23:46

JEDDAH: Social media in the Gulf region has been flooded with celebratory joy since news broke that Saudi Arabia had reopened its airspace and land and sea borders with Qatar as part of a deal to end a three-year diplomatic crisis. For many, the story is deeply personal.

On Tuesday Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told the GCC Summit in AlUla that the agreement to mend ties with Qatar underscored the importance of solidarity and security among Gulf, Arab and Muslim states.

A public embrace earlier in the day between the Crown Prince and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani at AlUla airport capped the Qatari ruler's arrival on Saudi soil for the first time since 2017.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a meeting with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani at the Maraya Hall in the historic city of Al-Ula on Tuesday. (Bandar Algaloud/Courtesy of Saudi Royal Court)

For hundreds of separated families, the significance of the reopening of borders and resumption of travel between Saudi Arabia and Qatar cannot be overstated, given the unique social fabric of the Gulf region, with its cross-border ties of marriage and blood.

Videos surfaced on social media showing men, women and children dancing and rejoicing at the easing of the crisis. Many said they were looking forward to reunions in the near future with their loved ones on the other side of the

border.

In one video, a Qatari boy could be seen jumping with excitement as he spoke with his father over the phone, exchanging promises of a reunion amid laughter, tears of joy visible on the boy's face. "Yalla (come on), let's go" the boy said and the father replied something to the effect: Get ready soon, my son.

Equally euphoric were the sentiments of Ismail Mohammed @soom3a70, a forward for Qatar's Al-Duhail FC football club. Born and raised in Makkah, the city where his mother still resides, he took to the social-media platform to express his delight with the latest developments. "Good news mom, our get-together is near," he wrote.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Similar scenes were probably playing out among members of many other families separated since 2017. Sara Abdulhakeem Abdullah, a 22-year-old Saudi who married her Qatari husband in 2018, can now freely travel to the Kingdom.

"I was awakened by my husband late last night with the news of the reopening of borders," she told Arab News. "Words fail me. It is so hard to put my feelings into words. I had been trying for a long time to find an easy way to go back to Jeddah where my parental family resides."

Despite the restrictions on air travel within the GCC countries on account of the coronavirus pandemic, last month Abdullah was able to briefly visit her loved ones in Jeddah with the support of her Qatari family. But the journey was circuitous and tiring both for her and her daughter, now a year old.

"Moving from one airport to another, waiting in transit for hours, is not the easiest thing," she said. "The journey was worth it in the end as I had not seen my father or siblings since getting married."



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman gives Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani a tour around the historic city of ALUla on Tuesday.
(Supplied)

As a newlywed who had to adjust to a new life abroad for the first time in her life, Sara said it was not easy being unable to meet up with her parental family. The pain of the separation was even more pronounced during her pregnancy, when she was not sure when her parents and siblings would be able to meet the first granddaughter of the family.

Shortly before her due date, she was united with her mother and youngest sister but the reunion was still short of three family members. Although she was relieved to have them by her side, her joy was short-lived as the two visitors had to return to Saudi Arabia within a month.

"It was the most difficult thing one can ever imagine, a feeling I wouldn't want anyone to experience. Those first few months of marriage were one thing, but not having my mother around when I needed her was the most difficult," she said. "But it's all old news now. The good times are soon to come."

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Qatar's Emir greeted by Saudi Crown Prince at Al-Ula ahead of landmark summit
Saudi crown prince gives Qatar emir tour of AlUla
Saudi crown prince holds meeting with Qatari emir at GCC summit