

# Syria: WHO demands 'unhindered access' to site of suspected chemical attack

The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) said Wednesday that it has received reports that some 500 patients at Syrian health facilities have exhibited signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals, after the shelling of a Damascus suburb over the weekend.

"We should all be [outraged at these horrific reports](#) and images from Douma," Peter Salama, WHO Deputy Director-General for Emergency Preparedness and Response said, referring to reports from the agency's [health cluster](#) partners – a WHO-led team of 118 national and international nongovernmental organizations, UN agencies, national authorities and donors working inside Syria to provide emergency and trauma care, as well as basic health services.

According to those reports, patients at health facilities displayed signs of severe irritation of mucous membranes, respiratory failure and disruption to central nervous systems.

More than 70 people sheltering in basements have reportedly died, including 43 with symptoms consistent with exposure to highly toxic chemicals. Two health facilities were also reportedly affected by these attacks.

These detailed reports from WHO's partners come as the Security Council tried and failed on Tuesday to adopt two competing resolutions that would have established a mechanism to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria, as well as another concerning a fact-finding mission in the war-torn country.

[Secretary-General António Guterres](#) also [expressed his outrage](#) at reports that civilians in the enclave continued to be targeted by toxic agents, saying that any confirmed use of chemical weapons, by any party to the conflict, "is abhorrent and a clear violation of international law."

For its part, WHO demanded immediate unhindered access to the area to provide care to those affected, to assess the health impacts, and to deliver a comprehensive public health response.

WHO reminded the parties to the seven-year conflict of their obligation to refrain from attacking medical facilities and personnel, in line with Security Council resolution [2286](#), which was adopted unanimously in 2016 and which also demanded an end to impunity for those responsible for such attacks.

The agency emphasized that any use of chemical weapons for harmful purposes is illegal under international law. Moreover, global norms against chemical weapons reflect a particular abhorrence to their disproportionate harm to the eldest, the most infirm, and the youngest among us.

WHO is currently coordinating the health cluster response for people

displaced from Eastern Ghouta and stands ready to step up assistance to the newly-accessible areas there once access is granted.

Since 2012 there have been sporadic reports of chemical events in Syria. WHO has no formal role in the forensic investigation of the use of chemical weapons. When an event is reported, WHO's role is to conduct epidemiological investigations and implement public health emergency response measures, as necessary.