

UN inspectors to examine Syria 'chemical attack' site on Monday

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USPA News - A United Nations (UN) fact-finding mission to investigate allegations that chemical weapons were used in an attack near the Syrian capital of Damascus last week is expected to arrive at the site within hours, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Monday. The mission, led by Swedish scientist Ake Sellstrom, arrived in Syria earlier this month to investigate previous allegations of chemical weapons use during the country's ongoing civil war, but they have sought access to the Ghouta area of eastern Damascus after a suspected chemical strike there is claimed to have killed hundreds of people.

Ban, speaking at a press conference in the South Korean capital of Seoul on Monday, said the team is expected to arrive in Ghouta within hours. "And every hour counts. We cannot afford any more delays. We have all seen the horrifying images on our television screens and through social media," he said. Calling it a "major and terrible incident," the secretary-general said all parties in Syria "have a stake" in finding out the truth surrounding last week's deadly attack. "The whole world should be concerned about any threat or use of chemical weapons. And that is why the world is watching Syria," he said. Monday's first international visit to the site comes after the Syrian government and rebels agreed to a local ceasefire to allow the inspectors to collect evidence safely. But some Western governments, including the United States, have criticized the regime of President Bashar al-Assad for taking 'too long' to allow in the mission. "I demand that all parties allow this mission to get on with the job so that we can begin to establish the facts," Ban said, adding that the world 'owes' it to the families of the victims to act. "The team must be able to conduct a full, thorough and unimpeded investigation. I have total confidence in their expertise, professionalism and integrity." Ban said the mission's success is in the interest of all parties in Syria and may have a deterrent effect on the future use of chemical weapons. "If proven, any use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances is a serious violation of international law and an outrageous crime," he said. "We cannot allow impunity in what appears to be a grave crime against humanity." Also on Monday, Assad warned other countries against military intervention and said Syria will never become a Western "puppet state," according to an interview published by the Russian newspaper Izvestia. He said Syria remains an independent country that will continue to fight terrorism, referring to rebels who are frequently described as 'terrorists' by the Syrian government. "These [Western] politicians should know that terrorism is not a winning card you can play when it suits you and keep it in your pocket when it doesn't," Assad said. "Terrorism is like a scorpion: it can sting you unexpectedly at any time. Therefore, you cannot support terrorism in Syria whilst fighting it in Mali, and you cannot support terrorism in Chechnya and fight it in Afghanistan." Assad, who has led Syria for more than 13 years since the death of his father in 2000, called on Western leaders to listen to the people in their own region, rather than seeking to install "puppet" leaders in the Middle East and elsewhere. He claimed the country's armed forces was making success in its operations and vowed to continue. "Our message to the world is straightforward: Syria will never become a Western 'puppet' state," he told the newspaper. "We are an independent country; we will fight terrorism and we will freely build relationships with countries in a way that best serves the interests of the Syrian people."

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