

Syria hands over last of declared chemical weapons stockpile

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USPA News - The last of Syria's declared stockpile of chemical weapons has been relinquished to Western governments for destruction, ending a nearly year-long operation in line with an agreement brokered by Russia and the United States, the world's chemical weapons watchdog said on Monday. The final 7.2 percent of the 1,300-ton stockpile, which included mustard gas and raw materials for the production of sarin nerve gas, was loaded aboard the Danish vessel 'Ark Futura' on Monday afternoon, said the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The ship made its last call at the Syrian port of Latakia before leaving for the Italian port of Gioia Tauro. Eradicating the supply of precursors and other chemicals has been a crucial condition in the program to destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. The chemicals will now be transferred to a designated facility on board the U.S. vessel 'Cape Ray' and to commercial facilities in Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States for destruction in the coming weeks. In addition to the completion of the removal operation, Syria has also destroyed all declared production, mixing and filling equipment and munitions, as well as many structures associated with its declared chemical weapons program, according to a press release issued by the OPCW-UN joint mission. "I think today we have reached a turning point in the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal," said OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü. Never before has an entire arsenal of a category of weapons of mass destruction been removed from a country undergoing a time of internal armed conflict, and Üzümcü described the mission as an "unprecedented" mission. "In the past seventeen years of its existence, the OPCW has never been faced with such a situation," he said. With Monday's removal, the total of declared chemical weapons materials destroyed or removed from Syria has reached 100 percent. The focus in recent weeks had been on the removal of the last 7.2 percent of chemical weapons material which had been difficult due to the area's volatile security situation. "Although there were delays in the process, the cooperation of the Syrian Arab Republic has been commensurate with the requirements of the decisions. And, crucially, we were able to count on the invaluable cooperation of the United Nations to provide logistical and security support for our verification effort in Syria through the OPCW-UN Joint Mission," said Üzümcü. Üzümcü went on to thank the 30-plus countries who contributed, either financially or otherwise, to the effort. But while the completion of the removal operation is significant, OPCW's work in Syria will continue. The clarification of specific details of the Syrian declaration and the destruction of specific facilities that were used to produce chemical weapons are two of the organization's next goals. Questions also remain whether Syria is hiding some of its chemical weapons. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry welcomed Monday's announcement. "[OPCW] operated under dangerous conditions to remove more than 1,000 tons of declared chemical weapons materials, a daunting undertaking that grew out of the agreement reached last year between the United States and Russia," he said. Kerry added: "In the coming weeks, the United States stands ready to begin destruction of a large amount of Syria's chemical weapons precursors. This unprecedented mission, deploying unique American capabilities, will ensure that they will not be used against the Syrian people or against us, our allies, or our partners, in the region or beyond." But despite the progress, Kerry said "very serious issues" remain about Syria's chemical weapons declaration. "We remain deeply concerned by the reports of systematic use of chlorine gas in opposition areas," the secretary said. "The international community has questions with regard to Syria's declaration that must be adequately answered." The European Union, which is one of the organizations that made significant contributions to the mission, also welcomed the completion of the removal operation. "This removal, although overdue, is certainly good news," a spokesperson for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said. "Today's development marks the fulfillment of the main goal of this operation: the removal of the entire chemical weapons stockpile from Syria, so that the risk of having them used again is eliminated." The Syrian government agreed to surrender its chemical weapons stockpile after sarin gas was used in an attack on the Ghouta area of eastern Damascus last year, killing 1,429 people according to an assessment by the U.S. government. The opposition and a number of governments including the United States has blamed the attack on the Assad regime, but the Syrian government insists rebels carried out the attack.

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