

Assad Says Syria Will Allow Access to Chemical Sites

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Smoke rising from buildings in Syria's central province of Hama after an airstrike hit Habit village on Sunday.

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syrian President Bashar Assad said his government would allow international experts access to its chemical weapons sites but cautioned in an interview broadcast Monday that rebels might block them from reaching some of the locations.

Assad's comments came as world leaders gathered in New York for the annual UN General Assembly at which the use of chemical weapons in Syria was high on the agenda.

In a reminder that the civil war continues despite Assad's overtures to the international community, fighting raged across Syria, including an airstrike that killed at least six people from the same family in central Hama province. A top al-Qaida commander in Syria was also killed in an ambush by rival, Western-backed rebels in the north, the latest example of rising infighting among factions seeking to topple the regime.

Assad told Chinese state TV that Damascus is dedicated to implementing a U.S.-Russian agreement to surrender its chemical weapons to international control. According to the accord that was brokered last week in Geneva, inspectors are to be on the ground in Syria by November and all components of the chemical weapons program are to be removed from the country or destroyed by the middle of next year.

Assad said the government would not have "any problem" taking experts to sites where the weapons were kept but some of the places might be difficult to reach because of ongoing fighting.

"I'm referring to places where gunmen exist. Those gunmen might want to stop the experts' arrival," Assad told CCTV in the interview, which was filmed Sunday in Damascus.

Opposition fighters have insisted that they would also cooperate with any inspectors or experts who come to the country.

Damascus met a first deadline under a U.S.-Russia agreement aimed at swiftly ridding Syria of its chemical arsenal, submitting last week what was supposedly the full list of its chemical weapons and production facilities to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons so they can be secured and destroyed.

Assad said his government would ensure that experts arrived "at the places where we produce and store our chemical weapons."

Technical experts at the watchdog organization have said they were reviewing disclosures from Syria about its chemical weapons program, but no details have been released.

The revelations of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal became public after an Aug. 21 attack near Damascus that a UN report found included the use of the nerve agent sarin. The U.S. and its Western allies say 1,400 people were killed in the attack in eastern Ghouta that brought Washington to the brink of military intervention. Activist groups say the death toll was significantly lower but in the hundreds.

The regime's agreement to surrender its chemical weapons stock has dealt a blow to the rebels, who had hoped a U.S. military strike would turn the tide of the fighting in their favor after months of setbacks. Opposition leaders have warned that the regime would continue to wield conventional weapons in the civil war, which has left more than 100,000 people dead and displaced millions since the uprising against Assad's rule began in March 2011.

Video showed a helicopter dropping explosives on the village of Habit, followed by pandemonium as villagers and fighters used flashlights as they frantically searched for survivors trapped under the rubble Sunday evening.

Villagers are seen using a pickax and car jacks to try to rescue a father and his son from the Hashmout family caught under slabs of concrete. Part of the father's body, his face and hands bloodied, could be seen protruding from the rubble. The son was saved but his father died.

Regime forces are fighting Sunni rebels in the Hama area in an attempt to keep them from advancing on villages inhabited by Alawites, members of Assad's minority sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

The group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, meanwhile, said its commander in Idlib province, Abu Abdullah al-Libi, was killed in an ambush by members of the Free Syrian Army who opened fire on his car near a border crossing with Turkey on Sunday. The statement was posted on a militant website.

Charles Lister, an analyst with HIS Jane's, said the killing underlined the increasingly hostile environment that ISIL finds itself operating in. The group has sought to expand its influence across opposition-held territory in the north and has increasingly clashed with long-existing rebel units affiliated with the FSA.

The assassination "will undoubtedly raise the level of tension amid insurgent forces in northern Syria yet further," Lister said, adding that the perception within ISIL militant circles that the FSA is a hostile force will likely increase.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an activist group that monitors the conflict, confirmed the death of al-Libi, his nom de guerre, saying he was killed along with 12 other al-Qaida fighters near the village of Hazanu, 10 kilometers away from the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey.

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