

Syria's getting too toxic

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The 29-month-long conflict in Syria seems to be heading into a new, more dangerous phase, following the August 21 incident in which chemical weapons were allegedly used in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus.

The conflict now seems poised to expand beyond Syria's borders, with the UN Security Council paralysed by the threat of veto by its permanent members.

The rapidly growing death toll (over 100,000 as of now), refugee outflow (over 2 million), and number of displaced persons (over 4 million) threatens the stability of neighbouring Jordan, Turkey and the already fragile Lebanon and Iraq.

The prolonged conflict has seen the greater involvement of al-Qaeda affiliated elements such as the Jabhat Al-Nusra, raising the spectre of Syria becoming an al-Qaeda base.

The Ghouta attack

In the early hours of August 21, a series of rockets appear to have been targeted on rebel-held areas in Ghouta.

Shortly after, a huge volume of messages and videos began appearing on social media platforms reporting deaths due to exposure to some kind of gas, possibly a nerve gas called sarin.

Medical responders also fell victim to this toxic gas. Medecins sans Frontiers, a well-respected and impartial NGO, has reported typical symptoms of nerve gas poisoning in a large number of victims, none of whom had any wounds or physical injuries.

Western intelligence agencies have evidence of orders being issued to Syrian military units to mobilise and prepare chemical weapons for rocket attacks from Assad-controlled strongholds against exclusively rebel-held areas.

Western sources put the number of deaths at over 1400, including more than 400 children. A UN chemical weapons inspection team which was present in Syria managed, after some delay, to access the area and collect samples; the analysis report is awaited.

Syria holds a large stock of chemical weapons; it has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention banning their use.

There have been regular reports of the use of chemical agents by the regime's forces in various parts of Syria. The rebel forces do not have access to nor the ability to deliver them. Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that sarin gas was used.

While the Syrian government and Russia deny these allegations, western and Arab countries have condemned the Assad regime and called for action to be taken against it.

The Syrian regime, in turn, has accused the rebels of using chemical weapons with the help of Saudi Arabia.

Differing views

The UN Security Council has been unable to take action because of differences among its permanent five, with Russia threatening to use the veto against a west-backed resolution calling for "Chapter VII action" against Syria.

The US has been preparing for a military strike of "limited duration and scope" to punish the regime (and not to remove it) and degrade its capacity to use chemical weapons in future.

The US Congress seems set to give President Barack Obama its approval when it meets on September 9. The British parliament refused to grant Prime Minister David Cameron the authority to take military action.

France has supported Obama's decision. The Arab League has strongly condemned the Assad regime, and suspended its membership, but has stopped short of explicitly calling for military action.

Meanwhile the US has built up its naval assets in the eastern Mediterranean to five missile destroyers and three nuclear submarines heavily armed with cruise missiles, and stationed two carrier battle groups there.

The US, France, and the UK have built up air assets at bases in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Cyprus. Israel has

been preparing for any eventuality, including gas attacks, and has tested its anti-missile defence systems.

Defusing the tension

The tensions in the region and the possibility of a US military strike and counter by Syria and Iran have created turmoil in the oil and financial markets. Further volatility can be expected with prospects of the conflict widening and including the use of chemical weapons. Many countries, including India, have called for a political solution.

What constructive action can be taken even if there is a military strike?

First and foremost, the Security Council must strongly condemn the use of chemical weapons and call on all parties to declare and place all their stocks of such weapons under international supervision and control by the OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons).

The wording of such a resolution should be such as to make it difficult to veto. Otherwise, the General Assembly should step in with an appropriate resolution under “uniting for peace”.

Secondly, the Security Council should organise the Geneva Conference in which all the parties to the Syrian conflict and Security Council members should participate without preconditions in order to find a peaceful solution.

This effort can no longer be outsourced to the US and Russia, but must be brought under the broader UN framework as soon as possible.

Only then can we begin to deal sensibly with this long drawn-out issue.

(The author is a former Ambassador of India who has served in Syria.)

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