Ignoring UN, Russia and Assad Continue Syrian Chemical Weapons and Bombing Attacks Labeled War Crimes

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<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/03/06/ignoring-un-russia-and-assad-continue-syrian-chemical-weapons-and-bombing-attacks-labeled-war-crimes.html>

EXCLUSIVE: Ignoring a United Nations report  that decried the use in Syria of chemical weapons, targeted air attacks on civilians and forced deportations, Russian and Assad regime air forces are steadily continuing the same illegal tactics while U.N.-sponsored peace talks founder in Geneva.

The regime forces also seem to be refining new forms of their illegal chemical weapons. Syria researchers in London have pointed to the strong possibility that pro-regime forces have put warheads containing chlorine gas on short-range, ground-to-ground rockets as a supplement to poison gas canisters and bombs dropped out of helicopters and other aircraft.

In the view of experts consulted by Fox News, the ugly methods are basic elements in a war-fighting strategy that is only affected in terms of tempo by the ineffectual peace process.

“This is a sequential campaign,” notes Valerie Szybala, executive director of The Syria Institute, a non-partisan, non-profit research institution in Washington. “They aim to destroy the opposition, one place at a time.”

“They are re-engineering Syria,” she said.

“They have doubled down to close down the last pockets of resistance near Damascus,” said Genevieve Casagrande, an analyst who specializes in the Syrian opposition at the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW), an independent think tank specializing in Middle East military operations. “It’s part of the regime’s siege-and-starve campaign.”

The Russians and the regime “may draw down their attacks before negotiations begin, then ramp them back up again,” she said.  “But they are leveraging violence.”

Casagrande notes that her institute “has never been able to assess the Russian use of chlorine gas” in the Syrian civil war, but notes that Russian air forces use “incendiary weapons,” including equally illegal cluster bombs and other specialized munitions against Syrian civilian targets.

Due to their greater sophistication, she said, Russian warplanes are more frequently used to target “critical civilian infrastructure” -- hospitals, schools and marketplaces -- to drive people away from civil centers and the front lines of conflict.

They have been used recently in “continuous attacks” in Syria’s north-western Idlib province and the southern province of Dara’a, she noted.

Humanitarian organizations told Fox News of “multiple” instances where chemical weapons were used in the last month alone in the area of East Ghouta, an opposition stronghold on the east of  Assad’s capital of Damascus; at least two times in the town of Erbin, in that area.  At least two persons died as a result.

The experts also agree that the ugly tactics are working.

The regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and militias supported by Iran are slowly gaining ground in the countryside, while the air forces focus increasing punishment on civilian “infrastructure” --hospitals and schools -- in an effort to drive desperate civilian populations out of opposition strongholds.

An ISW report on March 2 noted that Russian airstrikes also have enabled the radical Islamists of ISIS to win ground from more moderate opposition forces and “likely” emboldened the local affiliate of Al Qaeda to do the same.

“The ambit of Russia’s anti-ISIS effort extends only so far as it aligns with its goal to preserve the Syrian regime,” the report’s author, Jonathan Mountner, observed.

While Russian warplanes may not be dropping chemical weapons themselves, the Putin government is doing its best to shield Assad’s regime from any additional sanctions for doing so.

Last week, Russia, along with China, vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution that would have banned the sale of helicopters to Assad -- favored vehicles for dropping chlorine gas “barrel bombs” on civilians.

The Trump administration’s new Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley lambasted both nations  for a “bizarre and indefensible choice” in defending Assad, but the resulting impasse has become par for the course in the Security Council: the Putin regime has exercised its protective veto seven times since the civil war began.

The latest stonewalling came after the U.N.’s most sustained -- and yet, ineffectual -- effort to amass the war crimes case in Syria. It came in the form of a 37-page report by a three-member “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” made public last week.

The trio were tasked to “identify all those for whom there were reasonable grounds to believe that they were responsible for alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law” in connection with the siege and conquest of opposition-held eastern Aleppo, which surrendered to Assad last December.

The human rights violations on the regime side were massive and relentless:  hundreds of air attacks, many against schools, hospitals and market places, in which hundreds if not thousands of besieged civilians died. (Other reports have noted that the exact number may never be known.)

The weapons involved included “aerial bombs, air-to-surface rockets, cluster munitions, incendiary bombs and improvised air-delivered munitions (barrel bombs), and weapons delivering toxic industrial chemicals, including chlorine.”

On one day alone, the report notes, “Russian aircraft conducted 42 air sorties, making at least  28 confirmed air strikes in eastern Aleppo city.”  Syrian air forces launched air strikes using chlorine bombs “throughout 2016,” the document adds.

Fully besieged by mid-July, eastern Aleppo’s civilian infrastructure was “pummeled,” the report says, “with disastrous consequences. Day after day, hospitals, markets, water stations, schools and residential buildings were razed to the ground. Women and children were “disproportionately affected.”

The report documents “numerous reports” of chemical weapons attacks affecting hundreds of people, and notes a one week period where there were reports of toxic chemical drops “daily” in one neighborhood.

The report records “repeated” attacks on health care facilities that “are afforded special protection under international law, with witness accounts of the destruction.

Food and medical supplies for East Aleppo -- including medicines that the U.N. was supposed to deliver impartially -- were blocked by the Syrian regime. (The report does not say it, but those medical supplies were stockpiled on the regime’s side for the divided city. So were vital medical equipment and blood supplies, which [the U.N. was still supplying to Assad.](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/10/27/blood-and-war-how-un-agency-cooperates-with-assad.html)

The report also summarized evidence that once east Aleppo had surrendered, summary executions, disappearances and forced deportations of at least 1,000 people added to the war crimes tally.

Most notoriously, the report documented an air attack against a United Nations-sponsored aid convoy that was headed into western Aleppo province, destroying 17 trucks full of food, clothing and medical supplies, and killing at least 14 civilian aid workers. The convoy was travelling with one of the rare permissions granted by Assad’s regime.

The attack began more than five hours after aid workers from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent -- an aid organization authorized by Assad -- had begun unloading supplies. Survivors described the highly organized attack as lasting more than 30 minutes. A subsequent examination of the munitions used included Russian-made cluster bombs, though the report also notes that “no Russian strike aircraft were nearby during the attack.”

The overall conclusion: the facts “strongly suggest that the attack was meticulously planned and ruthlessly carried out by the Syrian Air Force to purposefully hinder the delivery of humanitarian aid and target aid workers, constituting the war crimes of deliberately attacking humanitarian relief personnel, denial of humanitarian aid and targeting civilians.”

On the other side, the report documented random rocket attacks by radical opposition groups on parts of the city that remained loyal to Assad -- which amounted to a drop in the bucket compared to what the Russians and Assad were unleashing against their foes. Similarly, armed groups sometimes took away food intended for civilians and kidnapped and executed others, in unspecified numbers that clearly bore little relation to the impact of violence from the regime side.

Nonetheless, in its recommendations, the Commission report recommended weakly that “all’’ warring parties -- only two of whom, Russia and Syria, are U.N. member states and human rights law signatories -- “comply with their obligations under international human rights and international humanitarian law” -- making them, in effect, equivalent violators.

It did call on the Syrian regime to provide evacuees from east Aleppo with “adequate and safe living conditions” and “end all attacks against aid workers and humanitarian facilities” -- but made no mention of Russia by name.

[CLICK HERE FOR THE REPORT](http://www.foxnews.com/world/interactive/2017/03/06/report-independent-commission-february-2017/)

The Commission of Inquiry report also called on the “international community” to “promote efforts to ensure accountability” for the crimes it described.

At the moment, in typical U.N. fashion, that exhortation focuses on creation of yet another U.N. body, the ponderously named International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

The Independent Mechanism, created by the U.N. General Assembly to circumvent Russia’s Security Council veto, is supposed to gather and archive for future prosecution “further evidence and information on the crimes documented by the commission in the present report.”

A head for the Mechanism was supposed to be appointed by U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres by the end of February. So far that hasn’t happened.

Meantime, however, U.N.-facilitated peace talks are “moving in the right direction,” according to the U.N. Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. Having ended last week with little or no progress on anything, they will resume in late March.