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Whistleblower- the OPCW report on the alleged poison gas attack in Douma is not true

23. October 2019 at 12:44

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An alleged poison gas attack by the Syrian army in April 2018 was used as a justification for a massive military strike by the USA, Great Britain and France. Immediately after the incident there were considerable doubts about the "poison gas thesis". These doubts were swept aside by the media and politicians with reference to a report by the OPCW. However, this report is highly controversial even within the OPCW. In the name of the German "Nachdenkseiten" Karin Leukefeld had the opportunity to take part in a forum where a whistleblower from the OPCW research team now massively contradicts the organisation's report.

On 14 April 2018, the USA, Great Britain and France attacked Syria in a coordinated operation. The latest missiles were fired from submarines, ships and aircraft at targets in Syria. According to US sources, an alleged Sarin deposit had also been destroyed near Homs. If this had been the case, large parts of the central Syrian province would have been contaminated. The three western veto powers of the UN Security Council justified the attack with an alleged chemical weapon attack a week earlier, in Douma on 7 April 2018. They took over accusations of the armed groups Jaish al Islam (Army of Islam), the "White Helmets" and other opposition members who had immediately accused the Syrian army.

Although Syria and Russia had asked the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to send a team of inspectors to investigate the allegations, the US, UK and France launched their "precision strike for retaliation" without a UN Security Council decision. The OPCW team was in Beirut at the time. The Russian army later declared that the Syrian air defense had intercepted 71 of 103 cruise missile. The attack by the three Western nuclear powers could have triggered a Russian reaction. Not for the first time in the region, the world was facing a war between nuclear powers.

The Fact Finding Mission

On 1 March 2019, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) published the final report of the Fact Finding Mission (FFM)¹, which was to find out whether toxic chemicals had been used as weapons in Douma, an eastern suburb of the Syrian capital Damascus, on 7 April 2018.

¹ <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019/03/s-1731-2019%28e%29.pdf>

In the summary of the report it was stated:

- 2.17 Regarding the alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon on 7 April 2018 in Douma, the Syrian Arab Republic, the evaluation and analysis of all the information gathered by the FFM—witnesses' testimonies, environmental and biomedical samples analysis results, toxicological and ballistic analyses from experts, additional digital information from witnesses—provide reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon took place. This toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine. The toxic chemical was likely molecular chlorine.

This is not true.

This representation does not correspond to the truth, said now a source from the Douma investigation team of the OPCW. The source involved in the Douma (Syria) investigation met with a small group of people from four countries in Brussels on 15 October to discuss the OPCW's "irregular, unethical and fraudulent behavior" towards the investigation team and the international public. The original statement on the meeting with the OPCW source has now been published.

Invited was the [Courage Foundation](#), which supports whistleblowers like Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. Present were international law professor Richard Falk, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 from 2008 to 2014; retired British Major General John Holmes, Elisabeth Murray, former US secret service officer for the Middle East, Professor Günther Meyer from Mainz, doctor Helmut Lohrer from the board of IPPNW (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) and Kristinn Hrafnsson (Editor-in-Chief of Wikileaks). Few journalists, including the author, attended the meeting as observers.

The source "Alex" proved to be a person with many years of professional experience within the OPCW investigation teams, specialized in the production and analysis of chemical weapons. "Alex" had a leading position in the OPCW mission that was to investigate the alleged attack with toxic chemicals in the city of Douma near Damascus (7 April 2018) in April 2018.

"Be our voice", "Alex" turned to the small circle who listened attentively and asked countless questions throughout the day. The people involved in the Douma investigation were scientists, they wanted their results to be appreciated, discussed, corrected if necessary, but they had to be heard, according to the source. They did not want "to harm the organization", but rather to achieve "complete transparency of all investigations", as the Chemical Weapons Convention wanted. They want clarification within the OPCW, which had so far been prevented. "Deviating observations" of the Douma investigation team should be heard within an appropriate framework - the Assembly of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The full-day presentation of the source "Alex" clarified the structure of the Fact Finding Mission (FFM). The central elements of all OPCW investigations, consisting of securing samples, ballistics, toxicology and documentation of eyewitness reports, were explained in detail. The situation in Douma, the approach of the investigation team and the results were presented on the basis of publicly accessible photo and image material - so-called open sources. In a second information block, the source "Alex" described events before, during and after the mission.

The "[Fact Finding Mission](#)" (FFM) was founded in 2014 within the OPCW especially for investigations in Syria. Beyond the usual OPCW investigation teams, a separate structure applies to them. The FFM is divided into two core teams. The "Alpha-Team" is responsible for the Syrian government, the "Beta-Team" for the "rebels". While in the work of the normal OPCW investigation teams, various OPCW

departments can be involved as a kind of corrective, the FFM reports directly to the OPCW head: the general director, the "Head of Cabinet" and the head of the "Fact Finding Mission".

The alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma took place on 7 April 2018. The Syrian armed forces were already accused of the first reports of the opposition (open sources). This description was quickly adopted by Western states and threatened with retaliation. The Syrian government and also the Russian OPCW representative applied for an OPCW fact-finding mission, which was approved. On 14 April, the FFM team, of which the source "Alex" was a member, arrived in Beirut. Their journey to Damascus was stopped because the USA, Great Britain and France had launched a large-scale air raid on Syria. After that, the on-site investigations were delayed due to the precarious security situation in Douma. The first "interim report"² was published on 6.7.2018, the final report on 1.3.2019.

After returning to The Hague, according to the source "Alex", all samples were sent to two different laboratories. The research team had been asked by the Director General to submit an interim report as soon as possible. Then nothing had happened for a long time. It became clear to the source that the Douma investigation team had indeed been excluded from the subsequent work. The interim report that had already been prepared had been ignored, but instead an interim report had emerged that had not been written by those who had personally participated in the Douma investigation, the source said.

Internal e-mails, exchanges of texts and draft reports shown by the source confirmed this. The original participants in the Douma investigation tried in vain to include their divergent findings and analyses in the interim report. The Douma Mission inspectors were not granted the right to report divergent observations and assessments from the officially submitted report, although inspectors have this right according to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Chemical analysis and toxicology

The source "Alex" dealt extensively with chemical and toxicological investigations. No traces of "relevant chemicals" were found on either biomedical or environmental samples. The results of the inspectors' investigations, which were actually relevant, were neither included in the interim report nor in the final report. According to the source, the "bleach" mentioned in the interim and final reports were not researched by the team of inspectors at all. Chlorine-containing chemicals found in wood samples indicate preservatives for this wood, water and food. However, samples from the natural environment to determine the natural content of such substances were not taken. Thus comparative values are missing.

The chlorinated organic chemicals found in the samples were many times less than those found in the natural environment (e.g. water). This laboratory result, which was available at the end of June, cannot be found in either of the two reports. Instead, it says that "*sufficient justifications have been provided*" according to which "*a toxic chemical (substance) has been used as a weapon. This toxic chemical (substance) contained reactive chlorine. The toxic chemical was probably molecular chlorine.*" In other words, a "smoking gun" had been found, which was also directly disseminated by international media. In fact, however, according to the source "Alex", the chemical substances found (including bornyl chloride) were preservatives "*in a lower dose than in the coffee you drink*". In an internal correspondence it says: "*In most cases only 'traces' were recognizable, in parts per billion, as low as 1-2 ppb*". The abbreviation "ppb" stands for "parts per billion".

² https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf

Ballistics

There were also different analyses in the ballistic investigations, which referred to two gas cylinders that were allegedly dropped from the air onto two different houses. Chlorine gas was supposed to have escaped from these, killing a total of 43 people. The investigations had shown, however, that the cylinders could not have been the source of any escaping gas, the source said.

Ian Henderson, member of the Douma investigation team, had technically examined the position, condition and possible trajectory of the cylinders and had come to a different conclusion than the official report. His dissenting opinion was not taken into account. He wrote a [15-page report](#)³ which he circulated - contrary to regulations - within the OPCW. By distributing his report internally, Henderson had violated internal OPCW rules. It was ordered to delete all relevant e-mails, the source reported at the meeting in Brussels. Nevertheless, the report was made public⁴ and Henderson was investigated.

In the leaked report, Henderson concluded that

33. In summary, observations at the scene of the two locations, together with subsequent analysis, suggest that there is a higher probability that both cylinders were manually placed at those two locations rather than being delivered from aircraft.

The leaked deviating ballistic report was concealed from the leading international media. The OPCW made no statement.

The dead who were seen in various mobile phone pictures in one of the two houses on 7 and 8 April 2018 could not have died of chlorine gas, according to the source "Alex". All corpses had foam before the mouth, chlorine however gets into the lungs and destroys the tissue from the inside, foam is not produced. In a deviating statement to the official interim report it says: *"Symptoms were observed which do not agree with the effect of chlorine"*. There are also *"no other obvious candidates among chemicals that produce such symptoms"*.

According to the source "Alex", the Douma team's investigation revealed that these people a) died from highly toxic chemicals or b) from non-chemical substances. For this there should have been a separate examination of the corpses. However, as they had already been buried at an unknown place on the arrival of the examination team and were presumably in the stage of decomposition, no further investigations could have been carried out.

Eyewitness reports

In May 2018, 39 eyewitnesses were interviewed, 13 in Damascus, 26 in a country "X" to which a separate interview team travelled. 13 declared that there had been no attack with chemical weapons, the other 26 claimed the opposite. Some claimed to have been victims of the attack themselves. The minority opinion that there had been no attack with chemical weapons was not equally appreciated in the final report.

³ <https://docdro.id/Z2dCwtf>

⁴ <http://syriapropagandamedia.org/working-papers/assessment-by-the-engineering-sub-team-of-the-opcw-fact-finding-mission-investigating-the-alleged-chemical-attack-in-douma-in-april-2018>

Events after the Douma investigation

Particularly irritating were the events described by the source "Alex" for the period after the return of the Douma investigation team from Syria. The team had been ostracized from investigations, apparently another interim report had been worked on in parallel. When this report was made available to the team shortly before publication, a discussion about it was first postponed, then prevented. The seriousness with which the source "Alex" and also Ian Henderson tried to bring in their deviating observations became clear by means of shown e-mail communication. Their arguments, analyses and investigation results were ignored. Joint discussions of the Douma investigation team were promised but did not take place. Finally, massive pressure from an - unnamed - contracting state became apparent, which presented the original Douma investigation team with its own "reconstruction of the chlorine attack in Douma". Internally it was said that the report had to satisfy the politicians.

Conclusion

The Forum in Brussels was alarmed and worried about the "unacceptable approach (...) that occurred during the investigation of the alleged chemical attack in Douma, east of the Syrian capital Damascus, on 7 April 2018" after the presentation of the source "Alex". According to what was heard, one was "convinced that central information on chemical analysis, toxicological studies, ballistic studies and witness testimony was suppressed in order to seemingly favour a predetermined conclusion". In its statement, the Forum called for "all inspectors who participated in the Douma investigation to be allowed to speak and to present their divergent observations in an appropriate forum of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention. This is in keeping with the spirit of the Convention. They should have the opportunity to present their findings without fear of reprisals or censorship".

The Douma investigation should be resumed in order to "clarify what actually happened. This would help restore the credibility of the OPCW and document its legally established commitment to transparency, impartiality and independence".⁵

The declaration was also signed by José Bustani, who was unable to attend the meeting for health reasons. The Brazilian Bustani, former ambassador of his country to Great Britain and France, was the first director general of the OPCW, which he headed from its foundation in 1997 to 2002. Then he had to leave under the direct pressure of the then US administration of George W. Bush before the Iraq war. The then UN ambassador of the USA, John Bolton, who visited Bustani in The Hague on behalf of the then Vice President Dick Cheney, threatened him: "Cheney wants to get rid of you. You have 24 hours to leave the organization. If you don't follow Washington's decision, we have options... we know where your children live." His two sons lived in New York at the time.

The OPCW is financed by the contracting states, which - based on the structure of the United Nations - pay contributions. The USA is the largest donor with 22%. Japan pays 19.5% and Germany 10% of the annual budget, which is around 60 million euros.

Until 2021, Germany is a member of the Executive Council of the OPCW, one of the highest bodies. The "irregular, unethical, fraudulent behaviour" towards the inspectors of the Douma investigation team, which investigated the alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma (Syria), is also likely to have been noticed by the German representation.

⁵ <https://couragefound.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/OPCW-Statement.pdf>