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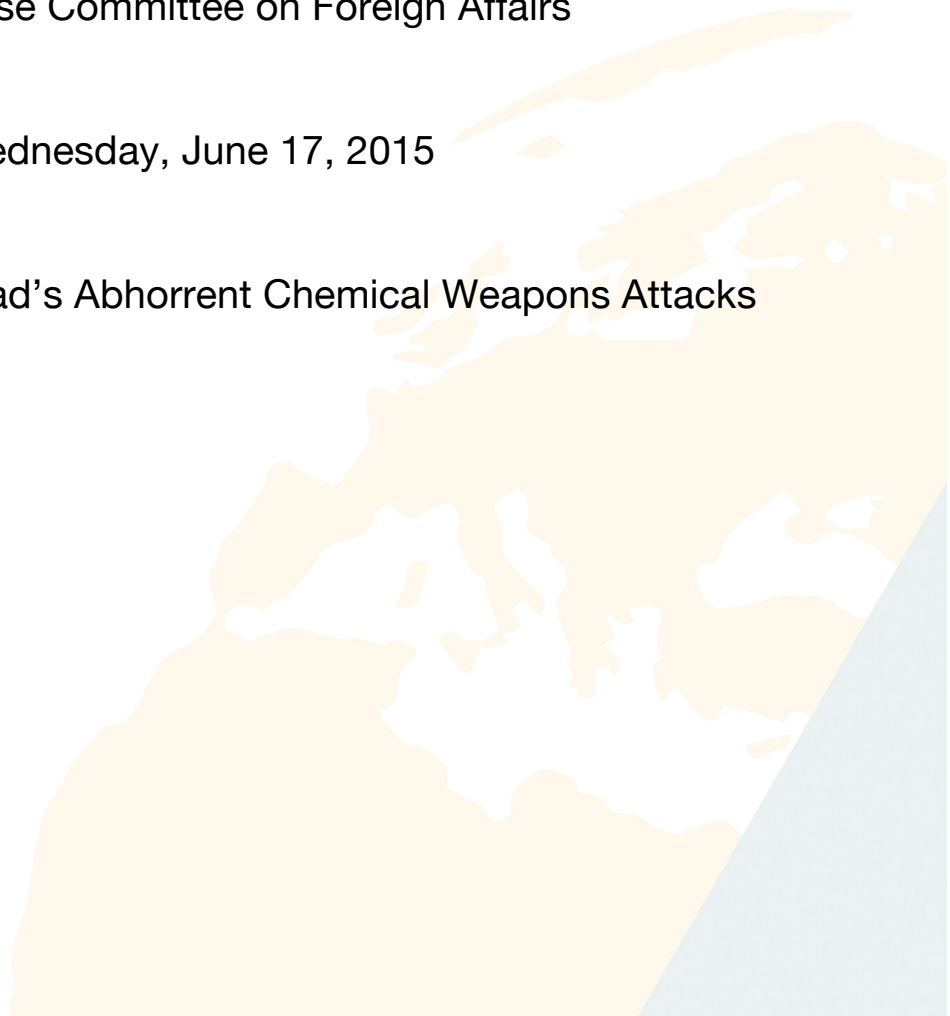
Testimony on Chemical Attacks in Syria

Witness: Farouq AL Habib
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Submitted to: House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Date of hearing: Wednesday, June 17, 2015

Subject: Assad's Abhorrent Chemical Weapons Attacks



Ladies and Gentlemen:

Allow me first to thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify about the ongoing tragedy that the Syrian people are living through, particularly those who are the victims of attacks by chemical weapons. This tragedy continues without intervention by anyone to protect civilians from these horrific weapons and all the other methods used by the Assad regime to kill Syrians and commit crimes that rise to the level of genocide. All this continues despite multiple international resolutions that prohibit using these horrific weapons.

My name is Farouq Habib. When the Syrian Revolution began, I was working as a banker in a private Syrian bank. My belief that my people have the right to live with dignity and freedom obliged me to join the peaceful movement to defend human rights in Syria. Currently, I am working for Mayday Rescue managing the training and equipping program for rescue teams in Syria known as the White Helmets.

Through my years of activism inside Syria since the beginning of the Revolution, I personally witnessed deliberate attacks by the regime forces against civilians, hospitals and rescue teams that were initially working spontaneously. Later, Syrians, particularly those in liberated areas had to establish civil defense groups with only the tools available to them in order to respond to the intense indiscriminate attacks. I now work with this organization to assist in responding to these attacks. Through my job, I constantly work with field search and rescue teams to determine their needs, be it equipment or training, and finding solutions for the challenges they face. We also work on assisting them in documenting their work and ensuring the world is aware of what they do. Therefore, I closely monitor the attacks, particularly those carried out by unconventional weapons, as they pose the greatest challenge.

These teams have faced an exceptional challenge with the regime's use of barrel bombs as a horrific tool to impose mass punishment against communities out of the regime's control. These TNT-filled weapons, which eject nails, metal scrap, and other random cheap and harmful shrapnel, take dozens of innocent lives everyday; but for many Syrians have become merely traditional weapons compared to the more advanced ones the regime developed by adding chlorine gas, which is inexpensive, readily available, and legally pursuing its user is difficult. This primitive, cheap and indiscriminate weapon has become a source of constant panic among Syrian civilians due to the fear it spreads when people hear news of its using in nearby areas, regardless of how limited the effects of its spread are.

This dirty chemical weapon causes physical injuries that show through symptoms like suffocation and fainting, and can lead to death if the injured are not attended to in due course. These weapons are most dangerous if inhaled by people stranded in small spaces, and that is what happens to those stranded under the rubble of buildings that collapse on top of their residents due to the force of barrel bombs.

In the past, rescue teams directed civilians to lower levels of buildings to stay safe when sirens would sound warning of imminent shelling. Waref Taleb followed those instructions when Assad regime planes raided his village, Sarmin, on March 16. He took his ill mother, Ayoush, his wife, Alaa, and his three children, Aisha, Sara, and Muhammad down to the basement of the building where they lived, seeking safety. However, that was the cause of their demise, all of them, as a result of the barrel bomb containing chlorine gas, which sinks in air. As the family huddled together in the basement, the chlorine became lethally concentrated around them, killing the entire family.

On that same horrific day, twenty of the White Helmets' volunteers were injured while they were trying to rescue and evacuate injured people. Those volunteers' injuries were the result of not being equipped with protective masks or any other gear to protect against chemical weapons.

That attack took place only ten days after UN Security Council resolution 2209, which reaffirmed the prohibition on the use of chlorine gas as a weapon and classified it as chemical warfare. The resolution also warned of taking action under Chapter VII in the event it is used again in Syria. This resolution is related to a previous resolution, 2113, which was released in 2013 and that called for destroying Syria's chemical weapons and also for taking action under Chapter VII in the event the chemical weapons are used. Resolution 2209 is also related to 2014's resolution 2139, which prohibits using conventional barrel bombs as weapons in Syria due to their indiscriminate nature, making most of its victims innocent civilians.

Unfortunately, during the three months that followed resolution 2209, the number of chlorine attacks was more than double those in the entire previous year. Between March 16 and June 9, 2015, Syrian Civil Defense teams responded to 23 air raids, during which 46 barrel bombs containing chlorine gas were dropped.

I do not think that any among this audience here today has the slightest degree of uncertainty about the identity of the perpetrator. There are hundreds of pieces of evidence including photographs, videos, and testimonies like the ones I attach herewith, proving that this gas spreads from the aerially-dropped barrel bombs, usually delivered by helicopters. As everyone knows, and as Ambassador Samantha Power has repeatedly noted that, the Assad regime is the only one using helicopters in the Syrian conflict, excluding the coalition forces of course.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The legitimacy of the United Nations, the UN Security Council and the credibility of the United States have diminished among Syrians who are suffering. No one can blame the Syrian youth when they lose faith in a political solution and resort to other ways to defend themselves, as they perceive the world to have abandoned them.

When I was struggling in Homs for democracy I and my colleagues believed that there were nations around the world that supported the spread of democracy. I believed and I organized others to rise up and challenge the dictatorship of Bashar al Assad and have been waiting for four years for my faith in the values on which this great country was founded to be demonstrated. There is a ruthless dictator in Syria who is using every means at his disposal, including chemical weapons, to destroy his people. He claims that he is fighting the Islamic State but only last week, both he and the IS were attacking together the armed opposition in northern Aleppo.

The legitimacy of the international community crumbles when it becomes merely ink on paper, forgotten in drawers of bureaucracy to become fatal.

As the greatest power in today's world, the United States, along with other international powers that chant human rights slogans and spread the values of justice and democracy, should move immediately to stop the killing machine operated by the Assad regime against the Syrian people. This can be done through imposing a no-fly zone that would prevent the regime's aircraft from continuing to drop chemical barrel bombs. A no-fly zone would also help to create a safe haven for civilians. No one can no longer use as an excuse the Security Council's inability to impose its resolutions as an excuse, because in reality, for oppressed people everywhere, it has become the Insecurity Council due to its blatant failure to protect them.

Annexes: List of chlorine attacks which the White Helmets responded to, between 16th of March and 9th of June 2015, maps, photos and videos of incidents and casualties.

Sincerely,

Farouq Habib
Syria Program Manager, Mayday Rescue NGO