

Frequently Asked Questions about the United Nations Mission to Investigate the Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic

What is the authority that grants the United Nations the right to investigate the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria?

UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/42/37C - adopted in 1987 - grants the Secretary-General the authority to investigate alleged uses of chemical, biological or toxin weapons. The mandate which is called the “Secretary-General’s Mechanism” (SGM) was reaffirmed one year later by UN Security Council resolution 620 (1988).

Under the mandate, the Secretary-General is authorized to carry out investigations in response to reports that may be brought to his attention by any UN Member State concerning the possible use of chemical and biological weapons that may constitute a violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol or other relevant rules of international law in order to ascertain the facts of the matter and to report promptly the results of any such investigations to all UN Member States.

Has the Secretary-General’s Mechanism been used before?

Investigations under the current guidelines took place in Mozambique and Azerbaijan both in 1992 (UN docs S/24065 of 12 June 1992 and S/24344 of 24 July 1992 respectively detail the results of those two investigations).

Why has the Secretary-General activated the Mechanism at this time?

On 19 March the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic reported the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Khan Al-Asal area of the Aleppo Governorate. The following day Syria asked the Secretary-General to launch an urgent investigation under the auspices of his Mechanism. The Secretary-General agreed to do so and contacted the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO) requesting their cooperation in mounting an investigation.

Other governments came forward alleging the same and other incidents of chemical weapons use and the Secretary-General announced that all credible allegations would be investigated. A special team for this purpose was put together comprising qualified experts from the OPCW and WHO. Professor Åke Sellström of Sweden was appointed by the Secretary-General to head the United Nations Mission.

What is the status of the investigation?

On 14 August 2013, the Government of Syria and the United Nations finalized the modalities for cooperation necessary to ensure the proper, safe and efficient conduct of the Mission. The team was dispatched to investigate three of the reported incidents, including Khan al-Asal. They arrived in Damascus on 18 August 2013.

Shortly after their arrival, reports emerged that there had been a major attack on 21 August 2013, again allegedly involving chemical weapons, in the Ghouta area of Damascus. A number of UN Member States wrote to the Secretary-General requesting an urgent investigation making use of the Mission already in Syria. On 22 August, the Secretary-General determined that the investigation team should, as a

priority, investigate this incident. The UN Security Council held an emergency meeting also on 22 August to discuss this incident and the President of the Council stated that there should be a thorough, impartial and prompt investigation of the latest allegation of chemical weapons use.

The Secretary-General instructed his High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ms. Angela Kane, to travel to Damascus immediately to lead the diplomatic and political effort to ensure the necessary cooperation from the Syrian Government in order to allow the mission to urgently investigate the Ghouta incident. This was obtained on 25 August and the investigation mission commenced its on-site work the following day.

The Head of the Mission presented his report to the UN Secretary-General on 15 September and the Secretary-General transmitted the report to both the Security Council and the General Assembly on 16 September and briefed them on the report.

What were the activities of the UN fact-finding mission in Syria?

Though the team faced many dangers in carrying out their work, including being shot at by sniper fire, the team was able to take biomedical and environmental samples and to interview victims of the attack, as well as medical personnel, in an effort to establish the facts. On Saturday 31 August 2013, they returned to the OPCW Headquarters in The Hague with their samples and equipment. The samples were sent to OPCW designated laboratories in Europe to carry out the analysis.

How long will it take before the results of the investigation into the 21 August incident are ready?

The results of the investigation into the 21 August incident have been published and are available (see http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/553).

What is the Secretary-General's view on anyone using chemical weapons?

As the Secretary-General has said, if confirmed, any use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances would be a serious violation of international law and a war crime. He said that any perpetrators must be brought to justice and there should be no impunity.

The Secretary-General has called for the members of the Security Council to unite and develop an appropriate response, should the allegations of use prove to be true.

Is the investigation now finished?

No. As the Secretary-General has said, as soon as it can, the Mission will return to Syria to complete its investigation and to prepare its final report.