Beat: Politics

UN probe into chemical weapons use in Syria to begin within days 3

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USPA News - Swedish scientist Ake Sellstrom, the newly-appointed head of a fact-finding mission to investigate allegations that chemical weapons were used during the ongoing conflict in Syria, said Wednesday that the investigation is likely to begin within two weeks. Sellstrom, in a telephone interview with UN Radio, said preparations for the probe have already begun and that the team`s members have almost been chosen.

"We are talking about, maybe, the mission will happen in a week`s time or so," he said. "Maybe in a week or two. It`s a matter of days." The scientist said the investigation will focus on allegations that a rocket with chemical materials was fired at a village in the Kfar Dael region near Aleppo, killing a number of people. There have been conflicting reports about the incident from both the Syrian government and the opposition. The decision to launch the probe was made after a formal request from the Syrian government, and Sellstrom said his team will be unable to investigate other allegations of chemical weapons use unless the government allows it. "Nothing can be done unless Syria accepts," he said, a day after being appointed to lead the team. Sellstrom said that, depending on the security situation in Syria, the team needs at least four more days of preparations before it can begin its investigation. "We will have three or four days of inspections, and we`ll have two to three weeks of report writing and chemical analysis," he said. Also on Wednesday, while speaking at a press conference in New York, UN spokesman Martin Nesirky reiterated that the investigation is of a very specific nature. "It is not the role of this mission to apportion responsibility or blame. It`s not a criminal investigation," he said. "It`s looking at whether chemical weapons were used, and not by whom." Nesirky previously described Sellstrom as an "accomplished scientist with a solid background in disarmament and international security." The Swedish scientist is currently project manager at the European Center for Advanced Studies of Societal Security and Vulnerability, in particular in major incidents with Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosive Substances (CBRNE). Besides serving as director at the Swedish Defense and Security Research Institute (FOI), the scientist has also served as chief inspector of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) and as senior adviser to the Chairmen of UNSCOM and the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) for the disarmament of Iraq. As part of his work at the UN Special Commission, Sellstrom investigated and dismantled Iraq`s biological and chemical weapons programs in the 1990s. He returned to the country in 2002 and found no evidence that the regime of Saddam Hussein had been working to develop weapons of mass destruction, as had been claimed by the U.S. and British governments. Earlier this month, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon announced the agency would launch an independent investigation into allegations that chemical weapons had been used in Syria. "The investigation mission is to look into the specific incident brought to my attention by the Syrian Government," he said on March 21. Ban added: "In discharging its mandate of an investigation mission, full cooperation from all parties will be essential. I stress that this includes unfettered access. ... My announcement should serve as an unequivocal reminder that the use of chemical weapons is a crime against humanity." Nesirky said Tuesday that the terms of reference for the fact-finding mission are being finalized in consultation with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO). "[But] while the terms of reference are being finalized, work is already well under way so that the mission can be dispatched quickly," he said. The crisis in Syria began as a pro-democracy protest movement in March 2011, similar to those across the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian government violently cracked down on the protests, setting off an armed conflict between pro-Assad forces and anti-government forces. A number of jihadist groups have since joined the fight against Assad`s regime. The United Nations estimates that more than 70,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and more than 1.1 million others have fled to neighboring countries since the start of the uprising in 2011. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths is far higher, but those figures cannot be independently verified.

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