

UN appoints Swedish expert to probe chemical weapons use in Syria

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USPA News - United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Tuesday appointed Swedish scientist Ake Sellstrom to head a fact-finding mission to investigate allegations that chemical weapons were recently used during the ongoing civil war in Syria. Martin Nesirky, Ban's spokesman, described Sellstrom as an "accomplished scientist with a solid background in disarmament and international security."

He is currently Project Manager at the European Center for Advanced Studies of Societal Security and Vulnerability, in particular 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. It has been claimed a rocket with chemical materials was fired at a village near Aleppo, killing a number of people, but there have been conflicting reports about the incident from both the Syrian government and the opposition. "The investigation mission is to look into the specific incident brought to my attention by the Syrian Government," Ban said on March 21 during a press conference in New York. "I am, of course, aware that there are other allegations of similar cases involving the reported use of chemical weapons." 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. Also on Tuesday, at least three people were killed and several others were injured when a suicide bomber blew up a vehicle in a street in northeastern Damascus, the capital of Syria. It follows a suicide bombing at a mosque in Damascus last week, killing 42 people and injuring more than 80 others. 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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