

Comment Could Settle Syria Crisis or Make it Worse

From VOA Learning English, this is In The News.

What seemed like an unplanned comment about Syria's chemical weapons had a major effect on world events this week. American Secretary of State John Kerry spoke last Monday at a press conference in London. He was reacting to questions about possible American action to answer a suspected chemical weapons attack in Syria. One reporter asked the secretary whether there is anything Syria's president can do to avoid an American military strike.

"Sure, he can turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week."

Mr. Kerry made clear he was speaking theoretically, and did not expect anything like that to happen.

"But he is not about to do that, cannot be done, obviously."

But Russia seized on the idea and persuaded Syria to do the same. That brought plans for American congressional votes on military action to a halt. It also led France to suggest a United Nations Security Council resolution on chemical weapons in Syria. President Obama has said he would accept a diplomatic solution if it can be carried out. But that would likely take weeks, at least.

Some officials in the United States and overseas are concerned. They fear that Syria and Russia will use Mr. Kerry's comment to direct attention away from the reported chemical attack and to avoid American action.

Mr. Obama has said the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must be punished for violating the nearly century old ban on the use of chemical weapons. He called for American action to prevent future use of chemical weapons in Syria. He proposed limited airstrikes on government targets. The airstrikes could happen quickly if Congress approves.

Joanna Kidd is a security expert with London's King's College. She says any move to place Syria's chemical weapons under international control would take a long time, if it could be done at all.

"It is a job that would take several months to do. And, of course, one should not forget that obviously there is a civil war going on in Syria, which would greatly complicate the process."

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons could provide inspectors to document controls on Syria's chemical weapons. But experts say there may not be enough inspectors to cover all of Syria. And they say the organization may not be willing to send them into the middle of the civil war.

Late this week, the Syrian government took its first step toward joining the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention. The convention bans the development, production and use of chemical weapons. Until now, only seven countries, including Syria, have failed to approve the treaty.

Mr. Assad says his country is now ready to give its approval. But he says Syria cannot be “brought to the final stage” while it is under the threat of an American missile strike.

In a related development, Secretary Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in Geneva. Mr. Kerry said they held what he called “constructive” talks on ending Syria’s chemical weapons program. He said they also agreed to do “homework” as part of an effort to get Syria’s warring sides to a conference on a temporary government.

And that’s In The News from VOA Learning English. I’m Steve Ember.