

Syria chemical weapons inspectors hail progress

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Chemical weapons inspectors in Syria say they have completed nearly half of their work in the country.

A spokesman for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons (OPCW) said the team was making good progress in its mission to inspect more than 20 sites.

However he said security remained a concern for the 60 inspectors - who have been in Syria since 1 October.

"A few" sites remained inaccessible to the team for security reasons, he said.

The OPCW's mission to rid Syria of chemical weapons was set up by a UN resolution.

It followed international outrage at a chemical weapons attack near the Syrian capital Damascus in August.

The organisation's work in Syria marks the first time the international chemical weapons watchdog - which won this year's Nobel Peace Prize - has been asked to oversee the destruction of a weapons armory during a conflict.

The OPCW, which is based in The Hague, said the team in Syria had completed nearly 50% of their work of inspecting sites and destroying equipment.

Under the UN resolution, Syria's chemical weapons production equipment must be destroyed by 1 November and stockpiles must be disposed of by mid-2014.

The deadline for Syria to submit its "destruction plan" was 15 November, the OPCW said on Thursday.

OPCW spokesman Michael Luhan told the BBC that there had been a number of security incidents over the last few days which had given the inspectors "cause for concern".

On Wednesday night there had been a mortar attack near the hotel the inspectors are staying in Damascus and over the weekend a number of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were detonated in cars nearby, he said.

Meanwhile, Syrian state TV reports that a Canadian United Nations worker, missing since February, has been released in Damascus.

Carl Campeau had been working as a legal adviser to the UN Disengagement Observer Force that patrols the ceasefire line between Syria and Israel in the Golan Heights.

The Syrian government says the Canadian was kidnapped by rebels but has now been handed over to a UN representative.

The UN confirmed that the nerve agent sarin was used in an attack on the Ghouta agricultural belt. An international conference on a political solution to Syria's conflict could take place in Geneva on 23-24 November, Qadri Jamil, Syria's deputy prime minister, said on Thursday.

He made the announcement after talks at the foreign ministry in Russia, Syria's main international ally.

More than 100,000 people have been killed in the fighting that has ravaged Syria for two-and-a-half years, according to the UN.

More than two million people have fled Syria and some 4.5 million have been forced from their homes within the country.

Casualty figures vary for the chemical weapons attack on the Ghouta agricultural belt around Syria's capital, Damascus, on 21 August.

It was estimated to have killed hundreds of people. The United States and other Western powers blamed the attack on President Bashar al-Assad's forces.

But Mr Assad accuses Syrian rebels of being behind it.

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