

Beat: Politics

UK says chemical exports had legitimate use but never reached Syria

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USPA News - Chemicals capable of being used to make nerve agents such as sarin were approved by the British government last year to be exported to Syria, but they had a legitimate civilian end use and the chemicals in questions never reached Syria, officials said on Monday. The Sunday Mail reported on Sunday that the British government allowed firms to sell chemicals to Syria capable of being used to make nerve gas.

The `revelation` came less than two weeks after chemical weapons were allegedly used near the Syrian capital of Damascus, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people. But a spokesman for the UK's Department for Business, Innovation & Skills denied the allegations on Monday, saying the British government operates "one of the most rigorous arms export control regimes in the world" and has been at the forefront of implementing international sanctions against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The department acknowledged it issued export licenses for sodium fluoride and potassium fluoride in January 2012, but the chemicals never reached Syria. "The exporter and recipient company demonstrated that the chemicals were for a legitimate civilian end use - which was for metal finishing of aluminium profiles used in making aluminium showers and aluminium window frames," the spokesman said. The licences were revoked in June 2012 after sanctions against Syria were tightened. "This shows that the system works and reflects changes made by this government to ensure that the system of export controls is robust, responsive and effective in upholding the highest international standards," the spokesman added. 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 100,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and millions more have fled to neighboring countries since the start of the uprising. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths is far higher, but those figures cannot be independently verified. Western countries, including the United States and France, are considering to take military action against Syria after they accused forces loyal to Assad of using chemical weapons - including sarin - during the August 21 attack near Damascus. Assad has rejected those accusations, urging the West to provide evidence that his regime was responsible.

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