

**Damascus, rebels trade charges on "chemical attack"**  
**By Dominic Evans, Reuters**  
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Syria's government and rebels accused each other of launching a deadly chemical attack near the northern city of Aleppo on Tuesday in what would, if confirmed, be the first use of such weapons in the two-year-old conflict.

Syria's information minister said rebels had fired a rocket carrying chemical agents that killed 16 people and wounded 86. State television said later the death toll had risen to 25.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the conflict using a network of contacts in Syria, put the number of dead at 26, including 16 soldiers.

A Reuters photographer said victims he had visited in Aleppo hospitals were suffering breathing problems and that people had said they could smell chlorine after the attack.

"I saw mostly women and children," said the photographer, who cannot be named for his own safety.

"They said that people were suffocating in the streets and the air smelt strongly of chlorine."

The photographer quoted victims he met at the University of Aleppo hospital and the al-Rajaa hospital as saying: "People were dying in the streets and in their houses."

President Bashar al-Assad, battling a two-year-old uprising against his rule, is widely believed to have a chemical arsenal.

Syrian officials have neither confirmed nor denied this, but have said that if it existed it would be used to defend against foreign aggression, not against Syrians. There have been no previous reports of chemical weapons in the hands of insurgents.

Information Minister Omran al-Zoabi said rebels fired a rocket with chemical weapons at the town of Khan al-Assal, southwest of Aleppo, in what he called a "dangerous escalation".

He said the rocket had been launched from Aleppo's southeastern district of Nairab, part of which is rebel-held.

"SCUD MISSILE"

But a senior rebel commander, Qassim Saadeddine, who is also a spokesman for the Higher Military Council in Aleppo, denied this, blaming Assad's forces for the alleged chemical strike.

"We were hearing reports from early this morning about a regime attack on Khan al-Assal, and we believe they fired a Scud with chemical agents," he told Reuters by telephone from Aleppo.

U.S. President Barack Obama, who has resisted overt military intervention in Syria's two-year-old civil war, has warned Assad that any use of chemical weapons would be a "red line".

Washington has also expressed concern about chemical weapons falling into the hands of militant groups - either hardline Islamist rebels fighting to topple Assad or his regional allies.

Israel has threatened military action if any chemical weapons were diverted to the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Lebanese Shi'ite movement Hezbollah.

Zoabi said Turkey and Qatar, which have supported rebels, bore "legal, moral and political responsibility" for the strike - a charge dismissed by a Turkish official as baseless.

Syrian state TV aired footage of what it said were casualties of the attack arriving at one hospital in Aleppo.

Men, women and children were rushed inside on stretchers as doctors inserted medical drips into their arms and oxygen tubes into their mouths. None had visible wounds to their bodies, but some interviewed said they had trouble breathing.

Three boys lay on the floor beside each other with drips in their arms. One man was taken from an ambulance wearing combat trousers. An unidentified doctor interviewed on the channel said the attack was either "phosphorus or poison".

Saadeddine, a spokesman for the rebel Higher Military Council in Aleppo, said its forces were not behind the attack.

Two weeks ago rebel fighters seized a police academy in Khan al-Assal, about eight km (five miles) southwest of Aleppo, which was being used as an artillery base by Assad's troops.

But the Syrian Observatory said Assad's forces had since retaken at least part of the town.

"PINK SMOKE"

A rebel fighter in Khan al-Assal said he had seen pink smoke rising after a powerful blast shook the area.

Ahmed al-Ahmed, from the Ansar brigade in a rebel-controlled military base near Khan al-Assal, told Reuters that a missile had hit the town at around 8 a.m. (02.00 a.m. EDT).

"We were about two kilometers from the blast. It was incredibly loud and so powerful that everything in the room started falling over. When I finally got up to look at the explosion, I saw smoke with a pinkish-purple color rising up.

"I didn't smell anything, but I did not leave the building I was in," said Ahmed, speaking via Skype.

"The missile, maybe a Scud, hit a regime area, praise God, and I'm sure that it was an accident. My brigade certainly does not have that (chemical) capability and we've been talking to many units in the area, they all deny it."

Ahmed said the explosion was quickly followed by an air strike. A fighter jet circled a police school held by the rebels on the outskirts of Khan al-Assal and bombed the area, he said.

His account could not be independently verified.

In the capital Damascus, activists released video footage on Tuesday showing men and boys lying in a medical center, all of them receiving oxygen, in the aftermath of what they said was a separate chemical attack.

They gave no details or casualty toll for what they said was an attack in Otaiba, east of Damascus. Like other videos and activist reports, it could not be independently verified.

One boy in a light blue sweater lay apparently unconscious on a medical bed with mucus around his mouth and nose. A man was using a suction tube to remove the mucus from inside his nose and the boy twitched.