Chemical Attack in Syria

Why in news?

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At least 70 people have been killed another 100 people were being treated in Idlib province in northern Syria after being exposed to a toxic gas that was dropped from warplanes.

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What is a chemical weapon?

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- Chemical weapons are specialised munitions that deliver chemicals that inflict death or injury on humans through chemical actions.
- Because they are relatively cheap and easy to produce, chemical weapons are referred to as the **“poor man’s bomb”.**
- Among the most commonly used chemical weapons are mustard gas, phosgene, chlorine, and the nerve agents **Sarin and VX.**
- **Sarin:** Odourless, colourless agent is extremely potent. Even trace amounts can kill humans, but its threat after being released in the atmosphere is **short-lived**.
- The UN had confirmed the use of Sarin in the deaths of hundreds in a rebel-held Damascus suburb in 2013.
- **Mustard gas:** It was widely used in World War I, and gets its name from its distinctive odour of rotten mustard.
- It is slow acting, and only about 5% to 10% of people exposed to it usually die.
- **VX:** It is odourless, and appears as a brownish oily substance.
- It is **very persistent** once in the atmosphere, it is slow to evaporate, and

thus tends to cause prolonged exposure.
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- This is the nerve agent that was used in the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un this February, 2017.
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- On March 16, 1988, in the final months of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's defence minister ordered warplanes to strike Kurdish population with mustard gas and Sarin. The attack is thought to have killed up to 5,000 civilians.
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What are the international conventions against the use?

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- The horrors of chemical weapons during World War I prompted countries to sign the **Geneva Protocol in 1925** to stop the use.
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- The core elements of the Geneva Convention, which went on to have 35 signatories and 140 parties, are now generally considered part of customary international law.
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- The Convention was, however, silent on the production, storage and transfer of these chemicals.
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- But, the **Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) of 1993,** plugged these holes.
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- The CWC outlawed the production as well as stockpiling of chemical weapons.
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- 192 countries have so far agreed to CWC — **4 UN states are not party: Israel, Egypt, North Korea and South Sudan.**
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- The CWC's main objective is to get signatories to destroy their stockpiles of chemical weapons, and as of December 2016, an estimated 93% of the world's declared stockpiles had been destroyed.
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- The CWC is administered by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).
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- India, in June 1997, it declared a stockpile of 1,044 tonnes of sulphur mustard, and promised to start the process of destroying it as per CWC guidelines.

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- In March 2009, India declared that it had completely destroyed its stockpile of chemical weapons, becoming the third country in the world (after South Korea and Albania) to do so.
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How have chemical weapons been used in the Syrian war?

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- Early on August 21, 2013, rockets containing Sarin hit the Ghouta suburb of Damascus, causing around 300 deaths.
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- Faced with the threat of international intervention, President Bashar al-Assad admitted to having chemical weapons.
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- The stockpiles were destroyed by August 2014, paving the way for Syria's entry into the CWC.
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- Estimates from the time put the size of the stockpile at 1,000 tonnes of chemical weapons, including mustard gas, Sarin and VX.
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- Now, this recent incident in Idlib, however, suggests there were more chemical agents in the country than had been officially declared.
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What can we infer from this?

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- More than 400,000 people are believed to have been killed and millions displaced since the crisis broke out.
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- With **violence continuing unabated** and the Assad regime not showing any real interest in settling the crisis, even hopes for peace and normal life look surreal.
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- Damascus has **not only committed a war crime** but also violated a major international agreement.
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- This is a regime that neither respects the fundamental human rights of its people nor cares about the international agreements it has entered into.

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- The real crisis of Syria is that its regime is acting with a sense of impunity, thanks to the blank security cheque the Russians have issued to Mr. Assad.
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- The international community could not hold Mr. Assad to account for his actions at any point of the Syrian war.
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- The latest attack should be a wake-up call for all these countries.
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- Syria has to be treated as an immediate priority. There must be a coordinated effort to bring the war to an end, and to hold the perpetrators of war crimes accountable.
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Source: The Hindu & The Indian Express

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