

Israel blamed for striking Syria army air base after allied warning

A Syrian regime tank advances into Douma yesterday. Picture: AFP
AFP, 12:00AM April 10, 2018

Russia and Syria last night accused Israel of conducting missile strikes on a Syrian military airport after the US, France, Britain and Germany warned of a strong response to “horrific chemical weapons attacks” on a rebel-held enclave near Damascus.

Moscow said two Israeli F-15 fighter bombers and missiles fired remotely from Lebanese territory had struck the central Tayfur air base yesterday. A military spokeswoman for Israel, which has bombed Syrian regimen positions including those linked to chemical weapons, declined to comment.

Syrian state news agency SANA said “several missiles” had hit the Tayfur airport, later adding that there were “dead and wounded”. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said “at least 14 fighters” were killed, including Iranian forces allied to the Assad regimen.

Washington and France denied responsibility for the strike, which came just hours ahead of an urgent UN meeting to be held early today over the use of toxic gas on Saturday on the town of Douma in Eastern Ghouta that killed at least 60.

US President Donald Trump and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, spoke by phone and vowed a “strong, joint response” to the chemical attack. The White House, along with the leaders of Britain and Germany, said the regimen of Bashar al-Assad “must be held accountable for its continued human rights abuses”.

Mr Trump had earlier issued a blistering warning to the Syrian regimen and its allies Russia and Iran via Twitter.

Damascus and its allies denounced the accusations, with the Syrian regimen brushing them off as an “unconvincing broken record”. Russia’s Foreign Ministry called the accusations a provocation. “A military intervention under far-fetched and fabricated pretexts in Syria, where there are Russian soldiers at

the request of the legitimate Syrian government, is absolutely unacceptable and could have the most dire consequences,” it said.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russian military had visited the site of the suspected poison gas attack and had not found any evidence to back up earlier reports.

Military officials quoted a doctor and an ambulance driver in Douma hospital who both said they had not received anyone with symptoms of chemical poisoning.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov suggested the attack could have been staged by rebels to pin the blame on Damascus.

Syria medical relief group the Union of Medical Care Organisations, a coalition of international aid agencies that funds hospitals in Syria, said: “The numbers keep rising as relief workers struggle to gain access to the subterranean areas where gas has entered and hundreds of families had sought refuge.”

SANA first said the missile strike on the Tayfur base was a “suspected US attack”, but later withdrew all reference to the US.

Regime forces, backed by Russia, have pounded Eastern Ghouta in a seven-week assault to dislodge rebel fighters, killing more than 1700 civilians and prompting tens of thousands to flee. The chemical attack on Douma prompted international anger, with UN chief Antonio Guterres saying any confirmed use of chemical weapons would be “abhorrent”.

The EU said “the evidence pointed towards yet another chemical attack by the regimen”, while Turkey stated it had a “strong suspicion” Assad was to blame. Iran came to Assad’s defence, saying the allegations were a Western conspiracy and echoing Russia’s warning against foreign military action.

AFP