

Syrian atrocities demand action

- The Australian, 12:00AM April 10, 2018

The horrifying poisonous gas attack that has killed scores of men, women and children in Syria leaves Donald Trump with no alternative but to abandon his hoped-for withdrawal of US troops from the country and ensure there is a punishing response to the outrage.

Israel, to its credit, is claimed to have launched a retaliatory strike against the Assad regime's Tayfur air base. But the burden of responsibility in the deepening crisis rests with Mr Trump, who showed commendably strong leadership last year when he ordered the firing of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the Shayrat air base after a similar chemical weapons attack by the regime. More concerted action will be needed now, however, if the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies are to be compelled to stop their criminal use of chemical weapons.

As welcome as the US attack on Shayrat was as a contrast to Barack Obama's feeble failure to mark his "red lines", it did not achieve much. The US attack did no damage to runways, which were used the next day by Russian combat aircraft. A more serious response might have taken out the Syrian air force. To his credit, Mr Trump, following the latest gas attack on the anti-Assad, rebel-held township of Douma, has named "President Putin, Russia and Iran" as being "responsible for backing Animal Assad". Such rhetorical Twitter bombs are all very well, but they are no substitute for the hard power needed to prevent thugs such as Bashar al-Assad and his cohorts from using chemical weapons.

Rightly, Mr Trump, in responding to the latest outrageous attack, has pointed out that "if President Obama had crossed his stated Red Line in The Sand, the Syrian disaster would have ended long ago! Animal Assad would have been history!" He will be similarly remiss, however, if he persists in pulling out US troops from Syria and leaving it to Russia and Iran as they underpin Assad and entrench themselves in the Middle East at Washington's expense.

It would be hard to imagine a set of circumstances more demanding of strong and resolute leadership from the US and the White House.