- Terrorism

UK subs move in for Syria attack

Assad forces take planes out of bases in anticipation of US-led missile strikes

LONDON— British submarines had been ordered to move within missile range of Syria as US President Donald Trump took to Twitter to announce missile strikes against Bashar Assad for another chemical weapons attack on a rebel area. Trump's Twitter announcement, however, was seen as telegraphing his punch to give the Russian-backed Assad regime time to prepare.

LONDON— British Prime Minister Theresa May had ordered British submarines to move within missile range of Syria in readiness for strikes against the Syrian military that could begin as early as Thursday night, the Daily Telegraph newspaper said.

Maywanted to be able to act swiftly if a decision to join US and French airstrikes on Syria was made, the newspaper said.

It quoted government sources as saying Britain was "doing everything necessary" to be able to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles from submarines against military targets in Syria in response to a chemical attack by Bashar Assad's forces on Douma, a rebel area.

May said all signs pointed to Assad's responsibility for the Douma attack and such "a shocking and barbaric act" should not go unchallenged.

"We're rapidly reaching an understanding of what happened on the ground," she said.

Gas poisoning symptoms

The World Health Organization (WHO) said 43 people were killed in Saturday's attack on Douma from "symptoms consistent with exposure to highly toxic chemicals."

More than 500 had been treated.

US President Donald Trump had warned Russia that the US military would strike at Syria in response to the chemical attack.

Trump, however, had not given a timetable for the strike.

Syria's military had repositioned some air assets following Trump's warning.

Syria's attempt to shelter aircraft, perhaps by locating them alongside Russian military hardware that Washington would be reluctant to strike, could limit the damage from US airstrike.

For days, Trump had been sharpening rhetoric against Syria and its backers—Russia and Iran—calling Assad an "animal" on Sunday.

On Wednesday, he declared that missiles "will be coming" and criticized Moscow for supporting Assad.

More time to prepare

Last year, the US military formally notified Russia over a hotline shortly before 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles struck the Shayrat Air Base of the Syrian military.

The targets of that strike included Syrian aircraft, aircraft shelters, petroleum and logistical storage facilities, ammunition supply bunkers, air defense systems and radar.

At the time, the Pentagon claimed that a fifth of Syria's operational aircraft were either damaged or destroyed.

But this year, should the United States and allies like Britain, France and others from the Middle East launch strikes on Syria, Assad would have more time to prepare.

Christine Wormuth, former US undersecretary of defense for policy, said Trump telegraphed his punch "so early."

Movement in Gulf

The Russian military said on Wednesday it had observed movements of US Navy forces in the Gulf.

A US strike would almost certainly involve the Navy, given the risk to aircraft from Russian and Syrian air defenses.

A US guided-missile destroyer, the Donald Cook, which is in the Mediterranean, and other naval assets could be used in the attack.

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, a retired Marine general, was more cautious in answering questions about Syria.

Two US government sources told Reuters the United States still did not know what nerve agent was used by Assad or where it came from.

However, there is some evidence it was launched from helicopters, they said.

Trump's comments, which were made after Russia vowed to shoot down US missiles in Syria, raised fears of a direct conflict between the United States and Russia.

With tensions growing, European air traffic control agency Eurocontrol warned airlines to exercise caution in the eastern Mediterranean in the next 72 hours.—