



CHEMICAL ATTACK IN SYRIA

Why in news?

- 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.

What is a chemical weapon?

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

What are the international conventions against the use?

- The horrors of chemical weapons during World War I prompted countries to sign the Geneva Protocol in 1925 to stop the use.

- 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.
- The Convention was, however, silent on the production, storage and transfer of these chemicals.
- But, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) of 1993, plugged these holes.
- The CWC outlawed the production as well as stockpiling of chemical weapons.
- 192 countries have so far agreed to CWC — 4 UN states are not party: Israel, Egypt, North Korea and South Sudan.
- 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.
- The CWC is administered by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).
- 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.
- 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.
- The stockpiles were destroyed by August 2014, paving the way for Syria's entry into the CWC.
- Estimates from the time put the size of the stockpile at 1,000 tonnes of chemical weapons, including mustard gas, Sarin and VX.
- Tuesday's incident in Idlib, however, suggests there were more chemical agents in the country than had been officially declared.

What can we infer from this?

- More than 400,000 people are believed to have been killed and millions displaced since the crisis broke out.
- 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.
- Damascus has not only committed a war crime but also violated a major international agreement.
- This is a regime that neither respects the fundamental human rights of its people nor cares about the international agreements it has entered into.
- 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.
- The international community could not hold Mr. Assad to account for his actions at any point of the Syrian war.
- The latest attack should be a wake-up call for all these countries.
- 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.

How have chemical weapons been used in the Syrian war?

- Early on August 21, 2013, rockets containing Sarin hit the Ghouta suburb of Damascus, causing around 300 deaths.
- Faced with the threat of international intervention, President Bashar al-Assad admitted to having chemical weapons.