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Assad is to blame for chemical strike – UN

Finding will challenge Putin as wrangle goes on

Tom Coghlan, Roger Boyes

UN inspectors will point the finger of blame at the Assad regime for a deadly chemical weapons strike that threatens to drag the US and other Western powers into the Syria conflict.

The report, due to be published on Monday, will include a wealth of evidence that a chemical nerve agent was used in the attack, according to sources.

Such a finding will throw President Putin on to the back foot as Russia and the US wrangle over how to force

identify the culprit of the chemical attack that killed 1,400 residents of Damascus, but to confirm whether or not chemical weapons had been used.

However, the inspection team has gathered a mass of circumstantial evidence indicating that the munitions must have been fired from government lines.

At the end of the first day of US-Russia talks in Geneva yesterday, John Kerry, the Secretary of State, rejected an opening Syrian timeline for disarmament as too lengthy. He told his counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, that the Russian Government had to persuade the Assad regime to co-operate.

"This is not a game," Mr Kerry said, standing alongside Mr Lavrov at a press conference. "It has to be real, it has to be comprehensive, it has to be verifiable, it has to be credible. Expectations are high and the Russians must deliver on that pressure."

Mr Kerry insisted that Washington was ready to deliver its promised punitive strikes if diplomacy failed, despite Mr Obama saying that he was shifting his focus to America's pressing domestic issues.

However, yesterday's talks, which will resume today, have ushered in a new phase of the Syria crisis of East-West bargaining which could take weeks.

While discussions took place in Switzerland, the war ground on relentlessly in Syria. Activists said that warplanes bombed one of the main

Continued on page 2, col 3

Declare your stockpiles now, Damascus warned

World, page 34

President Assad to rid himself of his chemical arsenal.

Mr Putin used an article in *The New York Times* yesterday to challenge the US, French and British version of the August 21 poison gas massacre.

"There is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons," he wrote.

Moscow's line is set to be contradicted by the UN findings, which are expected to corroborate claims that munitions casings at the scene point to regime involvement.

The report was never intended to



Up and away Jonathan Trappe sets off from Maine yesterday in his attempt to become the first person to cross the Atlantic by cluster ballooning. News, page 7

Stock market all a Twitter after the \$10bn tweet

Rhys Blakely Los Angeles

Twitter has revealed plans to sell shares on the US stock market in what will be Silicon Valley's most highly anticipated flotation since Facebook went public last year. The announcement, inevitably, came via a tweet.

Wall Street analysts have suggested that the company, which claims to have 15 million active users in Britain, equivalent to about quarter of the population, could be valued at more than \$10 billion (£6.3 billion). A listing had not been expected for another year.

The deal is expected to make its three founders — Evan Williams, 41, Biz Stone, 39, and Jack Dorsey, 36 — hundreds of millions of dollars each, even though they have largely ended their involvement with the company.

Twitter was created in 2006, the product of a brainstorming session at a now defunct podcasting company in San Francisco. The service, which allows users to transmit messages of 140 characters or fewer online, was initially viewed as an oddity.

Since then it has managed to weave itself into the cultural and political fabric. It helped to instigate the Arab Spring, but has also been condemned for failing to police bullies.

The world's most popular account belongs to Justin Bieber, the pop star, who has more than 44 million followers. President Obama is fourth, with 36.2 million, the highest for a politician.

Nobody outside Twitter's highest ranks knows how much money the company makes. For now, that will not change. It is applying to sell shares under rules that allow it to keep its finances secret, because it expects revenues of under \$1 billion this year.

The confirmation that Twitter will float comes just days after Facebook shares recovered from the steep fall in value they suffered after the company's calamitous initial public offering in May 2012.

Last night, shares in the world's largest social network closed at \$44.75, valuing the company at \$109 billion, an 18 per cent premium on the \$38 investors initially paid for the stock.

IN THE NEWS

MPs' expenses rise

The bill for MPs' expenses is higher than before the 2009 scandal and includes more relatives of politicians being put on the taxpayer-funded payroll. News, page 5

William quits Forces

The Duke of Cambridge is leaving his job as an RAF search-and-rescue helicopter pilot to devote himself to conservation and charitable work. News, page 3

Unskilled graduates

More than half of Britain's big employers say that the graduates they hire are not "ready for work" on leaving university, according to a survey. News, page 4

Royal Mail sell-off

Strike action next month will not prevent the flotation of Royal Mail, ministers said. Labour attacked the £3 billion sale as a politically motivated fire sale. News, page 6

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