Damascus 'Chemical Attack': Syria Activists Accuse Government

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At least five people have been killed in a suspected chemical weapons attack outside the Syrian capital, Damascus, opposition activists say.

The victims reportedly suffocated to death after government rockets and barrel bombs struck the rebel-held suburb of Muadhamiya on Tuesday.

Purported videos of the aftermath of the attack show several bodies with no visible external injuries.

But one security source denied that the military had used chemical weapons.

Hundreds were killed when rockets filled with the nerve agent sarin were fired at Muadhamiya and other Damascus suburbs in 2013. Western powers said only the government could have been responsible, but it blamed the rebels.

The Local Co-ordination Committees, an opposition activist network, said 10 people had died after "rockets loaded with chemicals" were fired at Muadhamiya on Tuesday night, while a local activist told the Associated Press that five were killed.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group, reported that the government's bombardment of the suburb with barrel bombs and rockets had killed or wounded 28 people, with all but five suffering breathing difficulties.

The main opposition alliance, the National Coalition, also said civilians in Muadhamiya had been "targeted with toxic gas" by the government.

The reports could not be independently verified, but video footage of what activists said was the scene at a field hospital afterwards showed bodies with no injuries but with blood around their mouths and noses.

A security source told the AFP news agency that the accusation that the military had used chemical weapons was "baseless". He added: "This is a cheap ruse and a broken record that they are using in an attempt to justify their defeats."

The government agreed to destroy its chemical arsenal after the 2013 attack.

Despite this, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) documented the use of toxic chemicals, such as chlorine and ammonia, in a series of deadly attacks on rebel-held northern villages between April and July 2014.

The jihadist group Islamic State has also been accused of using chemical weapons, including sulphur mustard. The OPCW said the blister agent was used in an attack on the northern town of Marea in August that killed a baby.