

Syria; Assad says Western strike could trigger regional war

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USPA News - Syrian President Bashar al-Assad warned Monday that a Western strike on his country could trigger a regional war, and urged the United States and France to provide evidence that his regime carried out a deadly chemical weapons attack last month. Assad, who has led Syria for more than 13 years since the death of his father in 2000, made the comments in an interview with the French newspaper Le Figaro.

He rejected a question from journalist Georges Malbrunot who asked him to provide proof that his army did not use chemical weapons during an attack near the Syrian capital of Damascus on August 21. "It is for those who are making the accusations to provide the proof. We have challenged the United States and France to put forward a single proof," Assad said, according to excerpts published on late Monday. "Obama and Hollande have been unable to do so, even to their own people." Although then-Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi confirmed in July 2012 that Syria possesses chemical and biological weapons, Assad would not confirm their existence during Monday's interview. Western governments have long accused Syria of having an active chemical weapons program. "Let's suppose that our army wishes to use WMD (weapons of mass destruction): is it really going to do so in an area where it is actually present and where soldiers have been wounded by these weapons, as the UN inspectors found during their visit to the hospital where they were being treated?" Assad said. "Where is the logic in that?" Monday's interview came just days after the U.S. government accused Assad's regime of using chemical weapons during last month's attack. A report based on information from U.S. intelligence agencies claimed at least 1,429 people, including 426 children, were killed in the attack. Obama said on Saturday that the alleged attack presents "a serious danger" to the United States' national security and "risks making a mockery" of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. He said he decided the U.S. should take military action against Syrian regime targets in retaliation for the alleged chemical weapons use, but announced he would first seek Congressional authorization. During Monday's interview, Assad warned of a regional war if the West decides to attack Syria. "The Middle East is a powder keg, and today the flame is coming very near," he said. "Nobody knows what will happen. Everyone will lose control of the situation when the powder keg explodes. Chaos and extremism will spread. There is a risk of regional war." But with a possible U.S. strike on Syria at least a week away, as U.S. lawmakers will not debate the proposed military action before September 9, French President François Hollande has continued his efforts to build international support and find partners for a strike against Assad's regime. A French intelligence memo released on Monday accused the Syrian government of carrying out a "massive and coordinated" chemical weapons attack, and that more attacks may be imminent. It came only a day after U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the U.S. had found signatures of the nerve agent sarin in hair and blood samples taken from first responders in east Damascus. Obama and Hollande's efforts to form an international coalition were hampered last week when British lawmakers rejected a proposal that would have paved the way for Britain to carry out military action in Syria, marking a stunning defeat for Prime Minister David Cameron whose government had been expected to join the U.S. and France in possible airstrikes.

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