

Jane's says Aleppo blast killed 'dozens' of Iranian arms experts

Contributed by Dailystar-AFP
Friday, 21 September 2007

By Agence France Presse (AFP)
Thursday, September 20, 2007

LONDON: Iranian engineers were among those killed in a blast at a secret Syrian military installation two months ago, defense group Jane's said, claiming the base was being used to develop chemical weapons.

The July 26 explosion in Aleppo, northern Syria, was reported at the time. The official Syrian Arab News Agency said 15 Syrian military personnel were killed and 50 people were injured, most of them slightly by flying glass.

The agency said only that "very explosive products" blew up after fire broke out at the facility and that the blaze was not an act of sabotage.

But in the September 26 edition of Jane's Defense Weekly (JDW), Syrian defense sources were quoted as saying the explosion happened during tests to weaponize a Scud C missile with mustard gas, which is banned under international law.

Fuel caught fire in a missile production laboratory and "dispersed chemical agents [including VX and Sarin nerve agents and mustard blister agent] across the storage facility and outside.

"Other Iranian engineers were seriously injured with chemical burns to exposed body parts not protected by safety overalls," the publication quoted the sources as saying. Among the dead were "dozens" of Iranian missile weaponization engineers, it added.

The claims come as North Korea denied reports it was helping Syria develop nuclear weapons and intense speculation that a recent Israeli air raid on Syria may have targeted a joint nuclear project.

JDW said Damascus has since imposed a media blackout on the blast and had "destroyed" evidence that base was being used as a missile production site with Iranian help.

It also questioned the government's claim that the explosion occurred because of a sudden rise in the ambient air temperature that caused a chemical reaction of sensitive and highly volatile substances.

The article also quoted Syrian opposition sources as claiming that vehicles destined for car-bomb attacks in Iraq are prepared at the same facility under the supervision of Syrian intelligence and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

JDW assessed that the incident confirmed information that the two countries have been involved in developing chemical weapons for more than two years under a strategic co-operation agreement.

It said Iran helped Syria in the planning, establishment and management of five facilities designed to develop chemical weapons on what is said was "an industrial scale."

An Iranian chemical manufacturer, whose identity JDW said it knows and with connections to the Islamic Republic's defense industry, and a Syrian firm with links to the military have made a number of deals since 2004.

One of JDW sources said that the agreements involved the importation to Syria of "hundreds of tons of sodium sulphide, hydrochloric acid and ethylene glycol-MEG from Iran," which, the weekly said, can be used to produce mustard gas and Sarin. - AFP

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