

Open with phosphorus attack cell phone audio

You are listening to audio from a phosphorus attack filmed in Syria, specifically in the town of Hamouriyah located in Eastern Ghouta. If you could see the video, you might be struck by how much it looks like a fireworks display. Except instead of dissipating as it falls, the phosphorus rocks the town with explosions, lighting fires that illuminate entire blocks. The region, a suburb of Damascus, is now entering its fourth week of bombardment by government forces. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights—a war monitoring group—reports that almost 1,100 civilians have been killed and over 4,000 more have been wounded since this round of combat began. A number of people in the region have told reporters that the bombings seem endless—one activist, Abdelmalik Aboud, told Al Jazeera: “Warplanes covered the sky in Eastern Ghouta yesterday. The shelling was focused on the underground shelters and mosques and the places that people have tried to hide in, due to the constant bombardment.”

Compounding the tragedy of this situation are the alleged chemical weapons attacks carried out by government forces. The first occurred late last February when witnesses reported smelling gas after an explosion that killed one and injured a dozen more. Those injured displayed symptoms consistent with chlorine gas, local health authorities noted. Now, the Syrian Civil Defense—a volunteer rescue group—has said that the town of Irbin was hit with chlorine gas, napalm, and phosphorus. Activists in the nearby town of Hamouriyah also uploaded the video which you heard at the beginning of the report. Faisal Mekdad, the Syrian Foreign Deputy Minister, has denied the charges, and at a news conference on Sunday said that rebel groups in Eastern Ghouta would try to fabricate more attacks.

Though the area has been under siege for nearly five years now, the Assad region formerly did not have the military strength to retake it. After Russia began providing him military support in 2015, Syrian government forces were able to completely reverse the course of the war over the next two years. With the wind firmly in their sails, they have begun tackling the regions where rebel groups are most deeply entrenched. According to the Syrian government, around half of the region has now been taken by pro-Assad forces, including the town of Mesrab, which is the largest in the area. In addition, the towns of Douma and Harasta have also been encircled, leaving local people deeply frightened. Aboud, the activist I mentioned earlier, told Al Jazeera that people are frightened because they know government forces are spiteful of the towns. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’s representative to Syria, Sajjad Malik, recently visited the town of Douma, and had this to say after returning:

Play audio from Malik's UNHCR Interview

This has been Cameron Lallana with International News.