

UN Commission Walks Back Claims Of Chemical Weapons In Syria

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The independent U.N. inquiry tasked with monitoring human rights abuses in Syria is walking back claims by one of its members that its latest investigation reveals strong “suspicions” rebel fighters in Syria carried out chemical weapons attacks.

“The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic wishes to clarify that it has not reached conclusive findings as to the use of chemical weapons in Syria by any parties to the conflict,” the UN Human Rights Council mandated commission said in a statement Monday. “As a result, the Commission is not in a position to further comment on the allegations at this time.”

The statement comes a day after Carla del Ponte, one of the U.N. inquiry’s four commissioners, said in a television interview that the commission had gathered eye-witness accounts indicating sarin gas has been used by unnamed Syrian opposition forces.

“Our investigators have been in neighboring countries interviewing victims, doctors and field hospitals and, according to their report of last week which I have seen, there are strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof of the use of sarin gas, from the way the victims were treated,” del Ponte told Swiss-Italian television Sunday. “This was use on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities,” she added.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry, which was established by the U.N. Human Rights Council in August 2011, does not have access to the country and relies on witness testimony from refugees in neighboring countries and other sources within Syria.

The Commission has already presented four reports to the Human Rights Council. It says the Syrian government is chiefly responsible for attacks

against civilians that likely constitute crime against humanity, but has also voiced increased concern over allegations of serious rights violations by the armed opposition. The Commission is expected to deliver its next report to the Geneva-based body on June 3rd.