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As the U.S. moved toward a possible military strike, President Barack Obama said even limited retaliation for Syria's alleged chemical weapons use would send a "strong signal" to its vulnerable government.



The administration scrambled Thursday to convince Congress members and international allies of the case against Syrian President Bashar Assad.

New hurdles appeared to be slowing the formation of an international coalition behind military action to punish Assad for the suspected chemical weapons attack that killed hundreds

of civilians last week.

Russia blocked British efforts to seek a resolution at the United Nations authorizing the use of force. British Prime Minister David Cameron said his country would hold off on joining any military efforts until a U.N. chemical weapons inspection team releases its findings. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the team is expected to complete its inspection Friday and report to him Saturday; they will share their conclusions with members of the Security Council, Ban said, but he didn't specify when that might happen.

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"If any action would be taken against Syria it would be an international collaboration," Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel reiterated Thursday. But the United States won't wait for U.N. backing to act, administration officials said.

The president said that while he had not settled on a response, the U.S. has concluded that Assad's government perpetrated a chemical weapons attack.

"And if that's so," Obama said during an interview with "NewsHour" on PBS, "then there need to be international consequences."

Obama did not present specific evidence to back up his assertion that the Assad regime is responsible for the Aug. 21 attack.

Many Congress members were pressing Obama to explain the need for military action and address fears that such a move might draw the U.S. deeper into the Syrian civil war. Both Democrats and Republicans were among lawmakers protesting that Obama hasn't made the case for a military strike, with some arguing that the president needs congressional authorization to order an attack.

U.S. officials were in search of additional intelligence to bolster the White House's case for a strike against Assad's military infrastructure. American intelligence intercepted lower-level Syrian military commanders' communications discussing the chemical attack, but the communications don't specifically link the attack to an official senior enough to tie the killings to Assad himself, according to three U.S. intelligence officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the intelligence publicly.

The administration was planning an intelligence teleconference briefing Thursday evening on Syria for leaders of the House and Senate and the national security committees in Congress, U.S. officials and congressional aides said.

The lineup for the call underscored the gravity of the matter. The briefers are Obama's national security adviser and intelligence chief, Susan Rice and James Clapper, alongside Secretary of State John Kerry, Defense Secretary Hagel and Adm. James Winnefeld, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, congressional aides said.

People take part in a protest organized by the Stop the War coalition calling for no military attack ...

Officials also said an unclassified version of the report by the Office of the Director for National Intelligence would be made public this week.

The White House ideally wants intelligence that links the attack directly to Assad or someone in his inner circle, to rule out the possibility that a rogue element of the military decided to use chemical weapons without Assad's authorization.

That quest for added intelligence has delayed the release of the report laying out evidence against Assad. The report was promised earlier this week by administration officials.

The CIA and the Pentagon have been working to gather more human intelligence tying Assad to the attack, relying on the intelligence services of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel, the officials said.

Both the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency have their own human sources — the rebel commanders and others who cross the border to brief CIA and defense intelligence officers at training camps in Jordan and Turkey. But their operation is much smaller than some of the other intelligence services, and it takes longer for their contacts to make their way overland.

Britain added a hurdle to deliberations about a military strike on Wednesday when it went to the U.N. Security Council with a draft resolution that would authorize the use of military force against Syria. The British resolution would authorize "all necessary measures under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter to protect civilians from chemical weapons." Chapter 7 allows the use of international armed force to back up U.N. decisions.

As expected, the five permanent members of the Security Council failed to reach an agreement as Russia reiterated its objections to international intervention in the Syrian crisis. Russia, along with China, has blocked past attempts to sanction the Assad government.

Obama said he was not seeking a lengthy, open-ended conflict in Syria, indicating that any U.S. response would be limited in scope. But he argued that Syria's use of chemical weapons not only violated international norms, but threatened "America's core self-interest."

"We do have to make sure that when countries break international norms on weapons like chemical weapons that could threaten us, that they are held accountable," he said.

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\*\* sursa : AP Intelligence Writer Kimberly Dozier contributed to this report.