

Over 70 killed in attack on Ghouta

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Aid groups fear death toll may go up in suspected gas assault

CAIRO: More than 70 people were killed after a suspected chemical attack on the last remaining rebel stronghold in the eastern Ghouta area in Syria – with fears growing the toll could surpass 100 – aid organisations have said.

“Significant numbers of children” were among the “well over 70 people” killed in the attack on the city of Douma, a spokesman for the international charity Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations said on Saturday.

Ari D’Souza said a smell of chlorine had been reported, but that rescuers believed that sarin gas had also been used, as it sinks, and many of the victims had been found sheltering in basements.

The charity added that the death toll was expected to rise to well over 100, as rescuers had experienced “extreme difficulty reaching victims due to the continued bombardment on Douma”.

It said victims showed symp-

toms consistent with the inhaling of toxic gas, including “cyanosis; foaming of the mouth; cornea irritation; and the strong odour of a chlorine-like substance”.

The official Syrian news agency Sana dismissed reports of the attack as “chemical fabrications” and said that “terrorists” were repeating the allegations “in a blatant attempt to hinder the army’s advance”.

In one of the earliest reports, the volunteer rescue group White Helmets wrote on Twitter that a helicopter had dropped a barrel bomb filled with chemicals on Douma, killing at least 40 people and injuring hundreds.

The tweet was accompanied by images of apparent victims of the alleged attack, including children, with foam around their mouths.

The reports have not been independently verified.

The US State Department said it was closely following the “disturbing reports”. — dpa