The effort to dispose of Syrian chemical weapons is facing delays and an array of challenges related to the transport and the method of eliminating the chemical agents of the weapons, news reports have said.

Ahmet Uzumcu, the director general of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), said earlier this week that it would be difficult to meet the Dec. 31, 2013 deadline for transporting the most critical elements of the chemical weapons out of Syria.

“In view of the circumstances in this country, it will be quite difficult to meet this timeline,” Uzumcu was quoted by news services as saying in Oslo, where he traveled to receive the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the OPCW.

The chemical weapons materials were scheduled to be transported by road from Damascus to the Syrian port of Latakia. The road, however, runs through areas held by rebels engaged in a civil war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Washington Times quoted a U.S. warhead specialist as saying it was likely that rebels would attempt to attack any convoy to steal the chemical weapon materials.

"The probability that rebels are going to attack is very high," Richard Lloyd, a Tesla Laboratories warhead specialist, told the newspaper.
The critical chemicals agents would be shipped from Latakia to another as yet unidentified port, where they would be transferred to a U.S. naval vessel that is being specially outfitted to neutralize the chemicals in the Mediterranean using hydrolysis.

Uzumcu said that the chemical materials might be transported out of the country in January 2014 but added that he was confident that the deadline for completing the overall operation, set for June 2014, would be met. The operation is designed to destroy all those facilities used for the production of the weapons and delivery systems.

Foreign policy magazine said in a blog posting that Al-Assad’s request for special vehicles to be used in the convoy was being resisted by Western governments, fearing that the Syrian government would use them in their fight against the rebel forces.

Al-Assad agreed to the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal after the country came under heavy international pressure following a chemical attack in August on the town of Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus that left hundreds dead.

The Washington Times also reported that former U.N. biological-weapons auditor Raymond Zilinskas also raised questions about the safety of the operation to dispose of the weapons on the U.S. vessel, saying that it had not been submitted to a formal evaluation.

As of Thursday, there had been no formal announcement regarding the port that would be used to transfer the chemical agents to the U.S. naval vessel.

The Associated Press reported Tuesday that Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic had indicated his country might volunteer to be the site for the transfer but the matter must first be analyzed with public involvement.