

Mr Chairman,
Madam Minister,
Mr Minister
Honourable Senators,
Honourable Deputies,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on developments in relation to ongoing efforts to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons.

I especially welcome this opportunity, given the outstanding support that Italy has extended to the Syria mission. Italy has long been an important partner for the OPCW in the cause of chemical disarmament on a variety of fronts.

On behalf of the OPCW, I wish to thank Italy for its generous contribution in making an Italian port available for trans-loading Syrian chemicals. This comes on top of a EUR 3 million contribution to the OPCW's Syria Trust Fund and provision of a military aircraft to transport the first team of OPCW inspectors to Syria.

These contributions exemplify the spirit of cooperation underpinning the vitally important international effort to rid Syria of chemical weapons.

In my brief remarks, I will endeavour to provide you with as a full a picture as possible of how Italy's contribution will be put to use amid this broader effort. I also look forward to responding to any questions that you might have.

Honourable Members,

In the sixteen years since its creation, the OPCW has overseen implementation of the world's first global treaty to ban an entire class of weapons of mass destruction under international verification – the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Until events in Syria we had conducted our work very much behind the scenes – but with great success. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded in 2013 to the OPCW is in recognition of the fact that this Organisation makes a critical contribution to global peace and security.

To date, our inspectors have verified the destruction of some 82% of the world's declared chemical weapons. 190 states are now members of the OPCW – only six short of complete universality. Those states that have advanced chemical industries are subject to a monitoring and verification regime, agreed by States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention and conducted by OPCW inspectors.

The OPCW, in short, has a proven record of achievement in disarmament and is well prepared to meet future challenges. This includes, first and foremost, guarding against the re-emergence of chemical weapons through inspection activities. Close collaboration with scientific communities around the world is further enhancing our effective implementation of the Convention.

Honourable Members,

It is clear to all that the Syrian conflict is having an enormous impact on the Syrian people and on a very sensitive region of the world.

Yet, for almost three years, the international community was not able to obtain consensus on any aspect of this conflict – a conflict which has so far claimed more than 125,000 lives.

Chemical attacks in Syria last August, which were confirmed by a UN investigation that included OPCW experts, changed this. For the first time, the international community was able to agree on a course of action in relation to Syria – namely, removing the threat posed by these weapons. Mounting tension, as a result of the possibility of the military conflict widening, helped focus diplomatic efforts.

Russia and the United States played a pivotal role in this regard, following Syria's move to join the Chemical Weapons Convention on 14 October, last year. The Framework Agreement concluded in Geneva paved the way for a historic decision by the OPCW's Executive Council on 27 September on an accelerated programme for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons by mid-2014. This decision was unanimously endorsed that same day by the UN Security Council under resolution 2118.

The OPCW was quick off the mark in implementing this programme. The first team of inspectors arrived in Damascus on 1 October, and the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria was established on 16 October. In addition to completing initial inspections of chemical weapons-related facilities, the Joint Mission was able to verify that all of Syria's chemical weapon production facilities had been rendered inoperable before the target date of 1 November.

What this means is that Syria is no longer able to produce chemical weapons – a significant milestone that was reached only one month after the Executive Council's 27 September decision.

The next milestones, however, present challenges of a greater magnitude.

The Council moved quickly to agree on the detailed requirements for the complete elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons in a decision taken on 15 November.

Importantly, this key decision calls for the removal of all chemical weapons from Syria, in accordance with a request by the Syrian Government, for destruction outside the country.

Consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2118, the decision also identifies the chemicals to be transported and sets out timelines for their removal and destruction.

These chemicals have been grouped in two categories – priority one chemicals, comprising mustard agent and immediate precursor chemicals, and priority two chemicals, relating to raw chemicals of lesser concern. Precursor chemicals must be combined with other precursors to produce lethal nerve agents, such as sarin, which can then be used to fill munitions. This is generally done shortly before use.

The Executive Council decision on 15 November required putting into place a series of highly complex, interlocking arrangements for the transportation and destruction of Syrian chemical weapons. These arrangements have, in turn, required unprecedented levels of international support and coordination for what is an extraordinary and unique situation.

Apart from complicated logistical considerations, a fundamental aspect of the decision are arrangements for disposing of the chemicals. This has necessitated significant financial outlays, being covered by the OPCW's Syria Trust Fund, as well as a tendering process involving the treatment and disposal of some of the chemicals by commercial companies.

Generous technical and in-kind support of key partners provided the basis for devising a detailed transportation and destruction plan within the parameters set by the Council decision.

States Parties to the OPCW have asked me to present the plan to the Executive Council. I did so on 17 December.

Under this plan, Denmark and Norway are providing vessels and, along with Russia and China, military escorts for the transportation of the chemicals. Mustard agent and some priority chemicals, will be transported to an Italian port for trans-loading to a US vessel for destruction at sea. This will involve a tried-and-tested process of hydrolysis – breaking down chemical agents with hot water and a caustic compound. The resulting effluent will be stored on board the US vessel Cape Ray before being transported to other destinations for disposal.

Some of the priority chemicals will be transported directly to the United Kingdom for disposal at commercial facilities in that country. The remainder will go to destinations still to be determined. So far, Germany has offered to receive 370 metric tones of the effluent resulting from destruction of mustard agent for disposal on its territory.

Remaining chemicals will be transported directly to disposal facilities of commercial entities to be decided in the ongoing tender process I have already mentioned. This process has generated strong interest and will be finalised by early February.

As can be seen, all of these elements combine to make for an extraordinary collective effort, in which almost every component part relies on another in order to ensure success.

At this time, the first cargo of priority chemicals has been packed at the Syrian port of Latakia and loaded onto the Danish vessel. I have elsewhere addressed the reasons accounting for the delay in removing all chemical weapons from Syria by 31 December, in accordance with the timeline set by the 15 November Executive Council decision. These relate to the security situation, adverse weather conditions and challenges associated with procurement and delivery of items and materials necessary for the transportation.

There has been a lot commentary on environmental and health risks related to various aspects of the operation currently underway– much of which has been poorly informed. For example, it has been asserted in some places that chemicals will be dumped in the sea. In order to set the record straight on this particular issue, I can assure you that, not only would the dumping of chemicals in the sea contravene international environmental agreements, it is also expressly prohibited by our own Chemical Weapons Convention, which puts emphasis on ensuring the safety of people and protecting the environment.

It is important to remember that, while these chemicals are legally classified as chemical weapons under the Chemical Weapons Convention, they are toxic chemicals stored in bulk containers – not actual usable weapons in warheads, bombs or shells. With the exception of mustard agent, all these chemicals need to be combined with other chemicals to be made into active chemical warfare agents – in fact, relevant Executive Council decisions refer to them as “binary chemical warfare components.”

While they are hazardous in degrees, many of them have commercial applications and are regularly handled and transported by commercial entities within the constraints of legislation governing such activity. It is on this basis that the current tender process was advanced as a viable option.

As for destruction at sea, the proposed technology is, as I have already noted, well-tested and effective. OPCW inspectors will be on board the Cape Ray to observe this operation, for which they have received specialised training. Effluent resulting from this process will produce chemical compounds that can be disposed of at commercial facilities with minimal risk.

All states participating in this operation have agreed to do so on the basis that their activities would be well within the parameters of relevant safety and security considerations, including international standards and national legislation.

Italy's offer of a port for trans-loading is a key piece in what is an intricate jigsaw puzzle. It will involve containerised cargo being trans-loaded, under observation by OPCW inspectors, onto the Cape Ray and will permit others to follow through on their generous offers, especially the United States in undertaking destruction in international waters.

In short, Italy's decision to host the trans-loading operation will be critical for the success of the destruction process for mustard agent and priority one chemicals.

Honourable Members,

The mission to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons will, of course, not end the conflict in Syria. But it will have an enormously positive and wide-reaching impact.

The consensus that drove the decision on eliminating Syrian chemical weapons has provided an impetus for broader diplomatic efforts to achieve a political resolution of the conflict. This has already seen agreement reached on holding a conference later this month in Switzerland, bringing together parties to the conflict. The OPCW is proud to have contributed to forging this consensus, along with States Parties playing a major role in the Syria mission, such as Italy.

In conclusion, I would note that I have committed to consulting with OPCW Member States on all aspects of this mission as fully as possible, including by providing regular updates. My presence here today is reflective of this commitment.

With that, I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.

Thank you.