

**Regional Course on Medical Aspects of Assistance and Protection  
against Chemical Weapons for States Parties in the Latin America  
and Caribbean Region**

**20-23 October 2014, Havana, Republic of Cuba**

**Opening Remarks by OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü**

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H.E. Minister of Science, Technology and Environment [Ms Elba Rosa  
Perez Montoya],

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address this Regional Course on Medical Aspects of Assistance and Protection against chemical weapons – the first of its kind in the Latin America and Caribbean Region.

Let me express from the very outset my appreciation to the Government of Cuba for hosting this event, and for the excellent arrangements and warm hospitality accorded to participants.

I wish especially to acknowledge the support of the Cuban National Authority, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, and the Ministry of Health.

Cuba has an enviable reputation for the quality of its public health services and medical research. More than this, it has shown its willingness to share these services across the globe where need is greatest.

This course is therefore a welcome initiative. It comes from a region that has been at the forefront of disarmament and non-proliferation efforts for many years.

The populations of Latin American and the Caribbean countries were the first in the world to benefit from a nuclear weapons-free zone under the Treaty of Tlatelolco – a treaty that has since been emulated in the South Pacific, South East Asia, Africa and Central Asia.

And this region's activism has continued to help set a high bar for multilateral efforts in disarmament and non-proliferation.

Your strong support for advancing the Chemical Weapons Convention is no exception in this regard.

There are many examples of initiatives in the Latin America and Caribbean region that have served to strengthen the Convention, notably, the recent meeting in Buenos Aires on education and outreach that I had the honour to address.

For its part, the Convention has stood the test of time as the most comprehensive, outcomes-oriented treaty in the history of multilateral disarmament.

In only seventeen years, we have recorded remarkable, highly tangible success, with some 86% of all declared chemical weapons destroyed so far, and a membership of 190 countries.

It was for this that the Norwegian Nobel Committee honoured us with the award of the Peace Prize last year – an award we can all, States Parties and the OPCW Technical Secretariat staff alike, take immense pride in.

But at a time when we are rapidly approaching our goal of a world free of chemical weapons, we cannot afford to slacken our efforts.

This was brought home to us by the confirmed use of sarin gas in Ghouta in Syria last year, from which hundreds of civilians are reported to have perished.

This tragic incident clearly demonstrated two things – that our success will ultimately depend on our reach, and that building capacity for assistance and protection against chemical attacks will remain a high priority.

On the universality, we have redoubled our efforts to engage those six States not yet party to the Convention – Angola, Egypt, Israel, Myanmar, North Korea and South Sudan – at a time of heightened international interest in chemical disarmament.

To this end, I strongly encourage your governments to use your bilateral and regional contacts with these countries to bring them into the fold.

No country can afford to be outside the global consensus against these heinous weapons.

But, just as the Convention protects the populations of its members against the threat of chemical attacks by removing such weapons, it also

strives to mitigate the impact of any such attacks, as well as accidental releases of toxic chemicals.

Medical response is a first-order priority in this regard.

As part of our mandate and mission under the Convention, we are working to protect the health and safety of those involved in all aspects of working with chemicals, whether for disarmament and emergency response, or peaceful purposes.

At the same time, we need to be able to reassure the populations of our Member States that, should an emergency arise, the best medical care and countermeasures can be provided to assist those exposed to chemical agents.

Too often over the course of the past century, we have seen the horrific effects of chemical weapons – from the World War One battlefields of Flanders, to the suburbs of Damascus just last year.

The ongoing success of the Chemical Weapons Convention should, hopefully, not give us cause to exercise medical expertise in large-scale conflicts of the future.

Disturbingly, however, the threat from non-state actors is growing and remains one to which we must remain alert.

We should also not lose sight of the need to respond to any release of toxic chemicals, including accidental ones.

The Bhopal tragedy in India occurred almost thirty years ago, but the large number of victims that it claimed continues to act as an imperative for us to guard against large-scale industrial accidents.

As healthcare professionals, many of you here readily understand the nefarious impact of using chemistry to harm rather than benefit humankind as a corrupt reversal of the Hippocratic Oath that guides your work.

You likewise understand that toxic substances, like disease, do not respect borders.

The thematic breadth of this course – covering clinical, protective, pharmaceutical and infrastructural aspects of medical assistance and protection measures – indicates just how broad a challenge we have before us.

How we address this challenge, through the collective efforts of our Member States, forms part of the holistic regime that the Chemical Weapons Convention supports.

This regime is geared towards ensuring that no-one needlessly suffers from exposure to toxic chemicals – whether in a warfare situation, as a result of terrorist attacks, or from an industrial accident.

The mission to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons has reaffirmed the importance of such a holistic regime extending to all countries.

It is vital that all of our members work together to combat the threat that such weapons pose, now and in the future.

The OPCW, for its part, will continue to work together with all relevant stakeholders to strengthen the capacity of our Member States to respond promptly and effectively to any such challenges.

With that, allow me to wish you a productive and fruitful course.

I hope that your discussions will help stimulate new ideas and better information exchanges by which all our Member States might benefit.

Thank you for your attention.