

What Has Made the OPCW Successful

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Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be in the beautiful city of Prague before such an esteemed audience.

Prague has witnessed many upheavals over its more than 1,000-year history.

Though it was spared the ravages of World War II, the war's legacy left an indelible imprint on the Czech people, as it did on Europe, as a whole.

It ended a destructive and horrific war – but it also divided the European continent into two opposing camps, during the cold war.

For many years, your country was at the frontline of the very real possibility of a devastating war which could involve weapons of mass destruction.

How much things have changed since the end of the cold war, became especially clear on 5 April 2009.

On that day, you will recall, before 20,000 people at Hradčany Castle, President Obama held out a commitment “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

Since then, we have seen the New START Treaty concluded, reducing nuclear warhead numbers to historic lows between former Cold War adversaries.

While this is a positive development, disarmament efforts more broadly have not lived up to the great hopes engendered by the end of the Cold War.

But there has been one notable exception.

The most enduring disarmament dividend from the end of the Cold War was the global effort to eliminate chemical weapons.

This came in the form of the first treaty to not only ban an entire class of weapons of mass destruction, but also to verify its implementation – namely, the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Since it entered into force in 1997, we have seen extraordinary progress towards reaching the goal of a world free of chemical weapons.

In only eighteen years, 87% of the world's declared chemical weapons across 98% of the world's population and territory have been verified as destroyed.

That is, more than 61,000 of 72,500 metric tonnes.

In my remarks here today, I hope to account for this remarkable success from three broad but closely related perspectives on the Chemical Weapons Convention – the historical, the normative, and the operational.

I will also try to map out where we need to focus our attention now to ensure the continuity of our record of achievement well into the future.

I intend to do so in a way that specially relates to diplomats and foreign policy experts, for many of you here are the drivers of the sorts of agreements that our broader communities rely on for a safer future.

Looking back over the history of chemical disarmament, the Chemical Weapons Convention was, in many ways, the beneficiary of exceptionally good timing.

It was negotiated in earnest over the course of the 1980s – a decade that saw several propitious developments.

Foremost among these was a new spirit of cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and later, the Russian Federation in the twilight of the Cold War.

With some 88% of estimated global stockpiles of chemical weapons between them, their agreement was crucial – especially on a commitment to eliminating all existing stocks.

In the course of negotiations and bilateral consultations between Russia and the United States, this was not always going to be the case.

At the same time, persistent use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq War worked to spur negotiators on to achieve the most comprehensive outcome possible.

Even without the direct impact of social media at that time, reports and graphic images of some of the most terrible chemical attacks caused a public outcry.

The massacre of civilian residents in Halabja by Saddam Hussein's forces in 1988 has become emblematic of the inhumane and indiscriminate nature of chemical weapons.

But these events had deeper roots that also focused the minds of negotiators.

The fact that several of the world's major chemical-producing countries had inadvertently supplied materials to weapon programmes in Iraq and Syria, and possibly elsewhere, set alarm bells ringing.

This showed that chemical weapons – because of the networks required to develop them in some countries – were a global problem that needed a global response.

All of these historical factors played a crucial role in facilitating a broader, all-encompassing approach – one that was patently lacking in previous attempts to ban chemical weapons.

In particular, this approach drew important lessons from the shortcomings of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and earlier the 1899 Hague Convention.

These shortcomings were twofold.

First, they banned only the use of chemical weapons, not the weapons themselves.

And, second, they lacked any enforcement mechanism holding States Parties to their commitments.

On the normative side, what came out of negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva more than adequately covered these gaps.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is truly comprehensive in scope.

It prohibits not only the use of chemical weapons, but also their development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention and transfer.

For their part, States Parties to the Convention must take the steps necessary to enforce this prohibition in respect of all persons and entities within their jurisdiction.

And the Convention has specific provisions for addressing non-compliance, ranging from suspension of rights and privileges under the Convention, to imposition of sanctions under international law.

As importantly, the Convention enjoys a unique combination of provisions that make it stand apart from other disarmament treaties.

Not only do all of its rights and obligations apply to all States Parties equally, the Convention has a tried-and-tested mechanism for holding States Parties to their obligations.

President Reagan's frequent injunction in the 1980s "trust, but verify" was heeded closely by the authors of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

As a result, the Convention's international verification regime is the gold standard among multilateral disarmament agreements – and remains so, even after almost two decades.

This is in large part because it is the product of what were intensive consultations between policy-makers, scientists and industry representatives.

Since 1997, our inspectors have conducted more than 5,500 inspections at some 265 chemical weapon-related facilities and more than 2,500 industrial sites in more than 80 countries.

They are ready to deploy at short notice across the globe, including most recently to Syria.

There is one more fact worth considering from a normative perspective.

Near-universal adherence to the Convention has long established this treaty as a global norm.

With 190 States Parties, and only six countries outside the Convention, the global ban against chemical weapons is effectively enshrined in customary international law.

The steadfastness of consensus against these terrible weapons was reaffirmed by the strong international reaction to the confirmed use of sarin in Syria in August 2013.

What this shows is that chemical weapons are universally regarded as taboo, and that the international community is prepared to act to enforce the norm against them.

It is with this message that we are pressing states still outside the Convention to join without delay and without preconditions.

Encouragingly, Myanmar has heeded this call, having recently ratified the Convention, and Angola is preparing to do so also.

We look forward to renewing our engagement with South Sudan, but prospects for Egypt, Israel and North Korea coming on board in the near future remain dim.

This brings me to an operational perspective on the success of the CWC.

Let me start by filling out some of the statistics I related earlier to demonstrate just how tangible our achievements have been.

Among our 190 Member States, eight have declared possession of chemical weapons.

Three of these – India, Albania and a State Party that prefers not to be publicly identified – have completely destroyed their stockpiles.

Libya has eliminated its chemical weapons, largely stocks of sulfur mustard, and has only a modest amount of component chemicals still scheduled for destruction.

Iraq is in the process of finalising arrangements for destroying remnants of chemical weapons from its past programme under the Saddam regime.

In a remarkably short period of time, 98% of Syria's chemical weapons have been destroyed, including all of its stocks of sulfur mustard and sarin precursor chemicals.

And the United States and Russia, as holders of by far the world's largest stockpiles, are well on track to completing destruction operations by 2023 and perhaps earlier.

So far, they have achieved elimination of 90% and 87% of their respective chemical weapon stocks.

What this means is that, within the current decade, we may well be able to announce the complete elimination of all declared stockpiles.

More than any other programme to eliminate chemical weapons, the Syria mission has put the OPCW through its paces.

The figure I just cited – 98% of all declared chemical weapons stocks destroyed – was achieved in little less than a year after the historic decision by the OPCW's Executive Council on 27 September 2013 on an elimination programme for Syria.

The Syria mission has amply demonstrated just how effective a regime it is that we operate, even in the unprecedented circumstances of an active conflict.

It has also demonstrated that our Member States can operate in the spirit of the Convention to extend the strict letter of the Convention.

Specifically, under the Convention's provisions, it is the responsibility of chemical weapon possessor states to destroy their stockpiles and production facilities at their own cost and on their own territory.

States Parties agreed, nonetheless, with UN Security Council support in resolution 2118, to a Syrian request for most of its declared weapons to be removed and destroyed outside of the country.

And to keep up the operational tempo, more than 35 of our Member States, among them the Czech Republic, came together to not only finance this mission, but also to provide vital technical support.

This ranged from providing maritime transport and naval escorts to establishing a sea-based destruction platform and hosting land-based destruction operations.

Whatever differences of opinion have marred international efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria, all of our members worked together to achieve Syria's chemical demilitarization.

The US-Russia Framework Agreement on Eliminating Syrian Chemical Weapons concluded in Geneva was a crucial launching pad for this international effort, providing, as it did, the foundation for the OPCW Executive Council's decision.

This same spirit of cooperation was in evidence in the recent Executive Council decision on the reports of the Fact-Finding Mission, whose initial draft was prepared by Russia and the United States.

The speed with which we were able to implement the Syrian destruction programme – in cooperation with States Parties and the United Nations – was not at the expense of attention to detail.

Our experts continue to seek further clarification from Syrian officials on their initial declaration – through half a dozen visits to Damascus so far, as well as to several sites in question.

After some delays, we have also been able to verify the destruction of the first of 12 former chemical production facilities declared by Syria, with destruction operations well underway at several of the remaining facilities.

And the Fact-Finding Mission that I established last April to investigate allegations of use of chlorine continues its work.

Its second report concludes with a high degree of confidence that chlorine was used regularly and systematically in three villages in northern Syria.

While States Parties understand that the mission is not mandated to identify perpetrators of these attacks, they have left no doubt as to their deep concerns over its conclusions, and their unwillingness to tolerate use of chemical weapons in any circumstances.

But our success at the operational level goes well beyond accounting for weapons destroyed.

As I have noted elsewhere, disarmament is not just about securing the absence of weapons – it is a much more broadly-based endeavour that seeks to prevent such weapons from ever re-emerging.

This in itself is a much wider challenge than what we traditionally understand as non-proliferation – that is, stopping dual-use materials and technologies being sourced for weaponisation purposes.

In the case of the multifaceted work of the OPCW, efforts to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons range from more conventional forms of monitoring and control, to efforts to empower an ever broader community of stakeholders to assist implementation of the Convention – in all its aspects.

For example, our Member States are obliged to open up their industrial facilities to routine inspections, and to declare transfers of scheduled chemicals to underpin secure trade in dual-use chemicals.

Our consultative networks – most importantly, the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board – help us stay on top of advances in science and technology that could impact on how we undertake verification and other measures to implement the Convention.

Our coordination of assistance and protective measures provides States Parties with better assurances in responding to chemical attacks or accidental releases of toxic chemicals.

Our facilitation of exchanges of information and best practices on a wide range of issues, including more recently on chemical safety and security standards, has created effective peer networks.

And our training and assistance programmes aimed at fostering international cooperation on peaceful uses of chemistry have made clear the social and economic benefits that can accrue from chemical applications in consumer production, agriculture and human health.

To better support all these spheres of activity, we have also sought to expand and better target our education and outreach endeavours.

We are seeking to help not only States Parties' National Authorities better understand what it is that we do, but also industry, universities, schools and civil society.

By expanding and marketing our range of materials and tools, such as e-learning modules, we hope to empower more individuals and entities to promote a message of responsible science – of science in the service of peace.

As Vaclav Havel once noted, “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

We are certain that our message makes sense – but we are also determined to make sure it turns out well.

The onus is now on us – all of us – to ensure our disarmament gains are made permanent.

This will be a deepening challenge, least of all because of a changing strategic landscape of globalization, rapid scientific advances, and the malevolent intentions of non-state actors.

To meet this challenge, we will need to convert our past successes into future ones.

And to do this, we will need to shift the focus of our activities, adapt our methods, and broaden our stakeholder communities.

I am confident that we are well placed to do so with the support of the States Parties.

Let me conclude by expressing our deep gratitude to the Czech Republic which has been contributing to the implementation of the Convention not only by its own compliance but also by assisting other States Parties. In fact, the OPCW experts and inspectors have greatly benefited from the Czech Republic Training Facilities.

Thank you.