



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

EEBL Open Day, University of Rome Tor Vergata

“The Chemical Weapons Convention: An Instrument for Peace”

Keynote Speech by Director-General of the OPCW

Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü

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REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Professor Leonardo Becchetti,
Ambassador Trezza,
Dear students,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be in Rome once again. Speaking to the next generation of policy-makers, diplomats, scientists, humanitarians, and international lawyers has been some of the most rewarding experiences of my time as Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). I wish to warmly thank Professor Leonardo Becchetti for organising this event and I am grateful for this opportunity to engage with the students of the University of Rome Tor Vergata today. I am also pleased to be joined in this debate by Ambassador Carlo Trezza, a colleague and friend from my time at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, as well as the Italian National Authority for the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Despite its relative recent establishment, Tor Vergata has already earned international recognition for its academic excellence as well as its impact on international peace and security. In fact, only last year the International Master Courses in Protection Against Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and explosive Events were the recipients of the annual OPCW-The Hague Award.

Our organisation founded this award, in collaboration with the municipality of The Hague, after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013.

It is part of our effort to honour individuals and institutions for their outstanding contribution to a world free of chemical weapons. Creating such a world is the ultimate goal of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the international treaty that the OPCW is the custodian of.

That Convention is a unique instrument of international disarmament law. It is the first to totally ban an entire class of weapons of mass destruction. And this in all its aspects: the development, production, stockpiling, transfer, and use of these weapons are banned. And as a unique feature for the Chemical Weapons Convention the ban is guarded by a strict and effective verification regime. While disarmament treaties, like the CWC, have traditionally been negotiated by states as measures to advance and protect national security interests, peace has always been their predominate concern.

International law by itself, however, does not guarantee peace. Indeed, during times of war, it is usually the law, rather than innocence, that is the first victim. As the Roman legal scholar Marcus Tullius Cicero famously pointed out more than two thousand years ago: “Law stands mute in the midst of arms.” In order to be upheld and respected, international laws must be underpinned by universally shared values and ideals. These must be consistently fortified, along with the laws they sustain, if we are to avoid conflict and achieve abiding peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the beginning of last century, Cicero’s maxim not only held true, but the failure of legal constraints on chemical warfare in particular had horrific results for humanity. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the first international agreements prohibiting the use of chemicals as weapons, proved inadequate to prevent the horrors of gas warfare that were unleashed on the battlefields of World War One. By the war’s end, nearly 100,000 lives were lost to chemical weapons, and over one million soldiers would survive forever maimed or traumatised.

Even though chemical weapons have been recognised throughout history as inhumane and indiscriminate, they continued to be used regularly after World War One – often in conflicts hidden from the world’s view. Near universal disgust toward this method of warfare, however, crossed generations and cultures.

As a result, the entry into force in 1997 of the CWC marked a watershed moment for disarmament. The international community’s long-standing efforts to comprehensively ban chemical weapons had finally become a reality.

One-hundred-and-ninety-two countries are now State Party to the Convention, and 98% of world’s population lives under its protection. When the Convention came into force, the first priority was to eliminate the world’s stockpiles of chemical weapons. This was an unprecedented and ambitious endeavour.

Never before in the history of disarmament had the world agreed to remove a class of WMDs from military arsenals under an international verification. Since that time, over 96% of some 72

000 tons of declared chemical warfare agents has been destroyed under verification by the OPCW. This work has made a tangible impact on global peace and security.

Indeed, it was for our extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons that the Nobel Committee awarded the peace prize to the OPCW in 2013.

In its 21 years of existence, the Organisation, under the direction of its States Parties and through their mutual cooperation, has made significant strides in fulfilling its mandate. The OPCW's effective and reliable verification regime serves to enforce the CWC and acts as a crucial confidence-building measure. Our international cooperation programmes continue to promote a sense of participation and ownership amongst our States Parties whose economies are growing. Assistance and protection against chemical weapons is a crucial right enjoyed by States Parties. Our programmes in this area continue to strengthen national implementation of the Convention which is showing encouraging progress.

Underpinning these achievements is the unwavering commitment of States Parties to the letter and the spirit of the Convention; a treaty with peace and security at its core. As such, its significance reaches beyond the field of disarmament. It advances progress towards a more law-based and humane world order. It embodies the moral dominion of respect for agreed norms over arbitrary and irresponsible behaviour. It reinforces the sanctity of humanitarian ideals over warfare and the importance of collaborative approaches to achieving peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in a time of unparalleled progress. Economic growth and development have brought countless benefits and improved the quality of life of countless millions of people. However without peace, true progress of any kind is impossible. When peace is imperilled, economic and social developments as well as advances in business, science and technology are all at risk. For peace – above all else – is the foundation of our well-being and of our prosperity.

For the OPCW and its States Parties, our contribution is an unwavering commitment to ensuring the CWC is implemented and the norm against chemical weapons is respected. For the most part, the OPCW has carried out this work diligently, quietly, and out of the public eye. This changed in 2013 when the Organisation began its challenging and ongoing work in Syria.

In August of that year, the world witnessed the killing of 1400 innocent civilians in Ghouta - a densely populated suburb of Damascus. They were victims of a deadly attack with the nerve agent sarin. The incident created global outrage and prompted a crisis that brought us to the edge of international conflict. Those attacks set in motion a series of events that culminated in the accession of the Syrian Arab Republic to the CWC.

The mission to eliminate the Syrian chemical weapons programme that followed was unprecedented in the history of the Organisation. We had to carry out our work in an active war zone, under often dangerous conditions, within a very ambitious time-frame. With the support of 30 States Parties and the European Union, 1300 metric tonnes of chemical warfare agent were removed from Syria and destroyed outside its territory. Although clearly challenging, the mission

underscores that with unified political will and cooperation, the Organisation and the international community are capable of dealing with extra-ordinary situations.

The removal and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons was an impressive achievement. Unfortunately it did not mark the end of our work in Syria. In the face of persistent and credible allegations that chlorine had been used in Syria as a chemical weapon, I established a Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in April 2014 to investigate them.

Since that time, numerous instances of chemical weapons use have been documented by the Fact-Finding Missions and confirmed by a Joint Investigative Mechanism that was established by the United Nations Security Council in August 2015. Regrettably, the Joint Investigative Mechanism has ceased its operations, but the FFM continues.

It has become clear that this is not the only case where the CWC has been breached. Last month, the OPCW confirmed the use of a toxic chemical against civilians in the United Kingdom in March this year. It is clear that even with a global, legal ban that is supported by the overwhelming majority of countries, the use of chemicals as weapons persists.

As long as the threat of chemical weapons exists anywhere, it is a threat to all of us. As such, there is no room for complacency. We must continually and consciously work to make the norm against chemical weapons truly universal, strong, and enduring.

We cannot afford to continue to once again search for peace in the aftermath of war and begin building something new all over again. We have the effective means and the mechanisms to sustain peace and prevent conflict from happening. We have constructed institutions and processes for dialogue and cooperation. We must strengthen and use them to the fullest.

On the part of the OPCW, this means working on multiple fronts to ensure the CWC is upheld, adapting to the rapid advances in science and technology, and serving as an effective forum for assisting our States Parties to deal with the new security risks and threats.

As we near the goal of completing the destruction of declared chemical weapons, the OPCW and the global community must prepare for an era where preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons will be the main priority. This is a far more complicated task than eliminating existing stockpiles.

Achieving it will require the concerted efforts on the part of a diverse range of stakeholders, including industry, scientists, academics, and civil society. While stockpiles of chemical weapons diminish, the threat of chemical terrorism is rising.

We have already seen that non-state-actors, in particular terrorists, are willing and capable of obtaining and using chemical weapons. It is not difficult to imagine the impact of an attack against a large chemical facility, or the casualties that would result from the release of a nerve agent in a crowded city. To counter these threats, the OPCW is working with its Member States to improve their capacity to protect against such attacks and to mitigate their impact.

Monitoring and inspection activities cannot cover the entire global chemical industry given its scope and scale. To augment these efforts and to strengthen the global norm against chemical weapons we must expand our engagement and outreach. In this way, we raise awareness about the work of the Organisation, and nurture a culture of responsible science in our research institutions, universities, and in our schools.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The global ban on chemical weapons illustrates the power of international law and the vast possibilities of multilateral cooperation applied to a common cause.

In a world that sometimes finds it difficult to reach accord on crucial issues, the Convention and the work of the OPCW demonstrate what can be achieved if we remain steadfast in supporting global norms for the collective good.

Our world is inter-connected and inter-dependent. Its challenges can be effectively met only through collective efforts. The advances we have made were not achieved in isolation. They were made possible by a mutual commitment to shared norms and values such as equality, justice, and human dignity for all. Our survival depends on defining and safeguarding values that we as the international community have agreed are of universal appeal and application.

As the generation that will soon assume the helm of global leadership, the future of disarmament, peace, and security will be shaped by your values and actions. Your studies will prepare you to go on to varied careers with international organisations, research institutions, government, NGOs and the private sector. These diverse fields all have a contribution to make, as well as a vital stake in a future free of chemical weapons.

As we begin our debate today, I ask you to consider your future path. How can your chosen field help secure the gains we have made in chemical disarmament? And perhaps most importantly, how can it help fortify the multilateral model and ideals that are needed to sustain a peaceful world? I look forward to our discussion.

Thank you.
