



### **OPENING STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL TO THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AT ITS NINETY-SEVENTH SESSION**

1. I warmly welcome all delegations to the Ninety-Seventh Session of the Executive Council.
2. It gives me great pleasure to welcome the new Chairperson of the Council, Ambassador Abdelouahab Bellouki, the Permanent Representative of Morocco. I am confident that the Council will benefit from his long experience and outstanding diplomatic skills.
3. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the outgoing Chairperson, Ambassador Agustín Vásquez Gómez, the former Permanent Representative of El Salvador, for his able leadership of the Council.
4. I wish to express my appreciation to all Members of the Executive Council for your continued goodwill and dedication in meeting and working in this adapted modality, as we enter the second year of the pandemic.
5. I am grateful to all outgoing Members of the Council and I extend a warm welcome to all new Members.
6. During this challenging time of the pandemic, the OPCW remains resilient and continues to deliver on all its mandates. The Secretariat will continue to implement measures for the benefit of the health and safety of the delegations and staff members, until we have more information after the summer. The phased return to the office will take into account the Host Country's COVID-19 measures and the specific needs of the OPCW to guarantee the highest level of safety. Today, I would like to begin this session of the Council by underlining progress in some priority areas.
7. On the Centre for Chemistry and Technology—the ChemTech Centre—I am pleased to share with you some important milestones. On 14 April, the tender for the main construction company was successfully completed. Construction activities on site began in June, with the ground excavation and work on the foundation starting this month.
8. The funding target for the construction of the ChemTech Centre has now also been met, with over EUR 33.65 million contributed or pledged from 48 countries, the European Union, and other donors. I would like to express my appreciation to all the donors, whose contributions have enabled this significant achievement.



9. The ChemTech Centre Trust Fund remains open for further contributions, which we have started receiving, and which will be devoted to equipment and programmes. The Trust Fund will provide extra assurances for the successful completion of the project, and for international cooperation programmes to be carried out at the Centre as soon as the building is operational. The Secretariat is analysing which activities can be delivered at the ChemTech Centre that will enhance and support full implementation of the Convention. In this regard, I have been undertaking consultations with States Parties and regional groups to hear and incorporate your priorities into the activities to be offered at the Centre. This input is critical to ensuring that a list of well-defined programmes for the Centre is ready as soon as its construction is completed.
10. The ChemTech Centre remains on schedule and on budget. States Parties were provided with a full update of the project through a Note issued on 24 June.
11. Since the pandemic began, the Secretariat has successfully organised all mandated sessions of the policy-making organs. This includes the two parts of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties, two sessions of the Executive Council last year, in July and in October, and two this year, in March and now in July, under demanding circumstances. Our common success in this regard is the result of the goodwill and understanding of States Parties, and of the diligent preparatory efforts of the Secretariat staff. The Secretariat continues to develop its technical and organisational capabilities to conduct hybrid or fully online meetings of the OPCW policy-making organs. Technical preparations for the launch of an online meeting system have been completed. This includes the procurement of hardware and software, integration with existing conference systems, and certifying OPCW interpreters in using the system. The Secretariat is planning a simulation testing event for delegations before the next session of the Council, if conditions allow.
12. During the intersessional period, the International Cooperation and Assistance Division continued to implement its activities according to a flexible plan. Since the last session of the Council, 32 online capacity-building events have been conducted, benefitting 1,370 participants from all geographical regions.
13. On 3 June, at the invitation of the presidency of the United Nations Security Council, I briefed the Security Council in an open online format on the Syrian chemical weapons dossier. While the OPCW is an organisation independent from the United Nations, I accept, with the highest interest, to contribute to the task of the Security Council. The Secretariat shares monthly reports on this matter with the Executive Council. These reports are also sent to the Security Council, through the United Nations Secretary-General. This was the fourth such briefing I have provided to the Security Council since November 2018. On 24 June, I received a letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic, Dr Faisal Mekdad, containing comments related to my briefing to the Security Council and mentioning again Syria's wish to cooperate with the Secretariat. This letter, together with my response, was published yesterday on the OPCW Extranet for States Parties' information.
14. During the second part of its Twenty-Fifth Session, on 21 April 2021, the Conference of the States Parties adopted the decision "Addressing the Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic" (C-25/DEC.9, dated 21 April 2021).

15. In paragraph 7 of the decision, the Conference decided to suspend the following rights and privileges of Syria under the Convention:
  - (a) to vote in the Conference and in the Council;
  - (b) to stand for election to the Council; and
  - (c) to hold any office of the Conference, the Council, or any subsidiary organs.
16. In paragraph 8 of the decision, the Conference decided that these rights and privileges will be reinstated by the Conference once the Director-General reports to the Council that the Syrian Arab Republic has completed the requested measures of paragraph 5 of the decision adopted by the Executive Council in July 2020 (EC-94/DEC.2). Those measures are to:
  - (a) declare to the Secretariat the facilities where the chemical weapons used in the three attacks in Ltamenah in March 2017 were developed, produced, stockpiled, and operationally stored for delivery;
  - (b) declare to the Secretariat all of the chemical weapons it currently possesses, as well as chemical weapons production facilities and other related facilities; and
  - (c) resolve all of the outstanding issues regarding its initial declaration of its chemical weapons stockpile and programme.
17. I wish to underline that all of the mandates concerning the Syrian chemical dossier, given through the Convention and decisions of the OPCW Conference of the States Parties and Executive Council, remain binding on all States Parties as well as on the Secretariat.
18. I further emphasise that the Secretariat's work on the Syrian chemical weapons dossier remains active and ongoing on multiple fronts, in line with our mandates. To keep States Parties fully informed about all developments, a comprehensive in-person briefing on Syria was organised for States Parties on 30 June in two identical presentations, to allow the maximum possible number of delegations to attend, while respecting measures related to COVID-19.
19. On 12 April 2021, the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) issued a report on the incident that took place in Saraqib, Syria, on 4 February 2018. This is the IIT's second report, following the first issued in April last year covering three cases.
20. The report on Saraqib reached the conclusion that there are reasonable grounds to believe that on 4 February 2018 a military helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force, under the control of the Tiger Forces, hit eastern Saraqib by dropping at least one cylinder. The cylinder ruptured and released chlorine over a large area, affecting 12 named individuals. These conclusions are based on interviews, analyses of samples, a review of the symptomatology, examination of imagery, including satellite images, and extensive consultation of experts. The IIT also obtained a topographic analysis of the area in question, and gas dispersion modelling to corroborate accounts from witnesses and victims. The investigation relied on the relevant Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) report, as well as on samples and other material obtained by the Secretariat.

21. Currently, the IIT is investigating five cases and will report on them in due course.
22. The Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) continues its efforts to clarify the shortcomings found in the Syrian Arab Republic's initial declaration. I reported the outcomes of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth rounds of consultations between the DAT and the Syrian Arab Republic to the previous session of the Council. On 30 April, I sent a letter to the Syrian National Authority announcing that the twenty-fifth round of consultations was scheduled to take place between 18 May and 1 June. One new issue was recently opened and was meant to be taken up during this next round of consultations. It pertains to the presence of a neat chemical weapons agent found in samples collected in large storage containers in September 2020.
23. On 5 May, the Secretariat followed up its announcement by requesting the necessary and usual issuance of visas for the team members. In the absence of a response, the Secretariat informed the Syrian authorities on 14 May of the postponement of the mission to 28 May. On 26 May, still not having received any response from the Syrian authorities on the issuance of visas, or on the convenience regarding the proposed timing, I decided to postpone the mission until further notice.
24. The Secretariat will continue to seek the next opportunity to deploy the DAT for the Syrian Arab Republic to comply with all of its obligations under the Convention, the decisions of the OPCW policy-making organs, and the resolutions of the Security Council. On this matter, I recall that under the Convention all States Parties are to provide staff from the Secretariat with multiple-entry visas valid for a period of two years.
25. Pursuant to paragraph 11 of the Council decision adopted in November 2016, the Secretariat conducted the seventh round of inspections of the Barzah and Jamrayah facilities of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) between 8 and 13 November 2020. During this round, the inspections found no substances or activities that are inconsistent with Syria's obligations under the Convention. The conduct of further deployments remains subject to the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.
26. With regard to the detection of a Schedule 2.B.04 chemical during the third round of inspections at the Barzah facilities of the SSRC, the Syrian Arab Republic has yet to provide sufficient technical information or explanations that would enable the Secretariat to close this issue.
27. The FFM deployed to the Syrian Arab Republic from 29 March to 13 April 2021 to collect information and conduct interviews regarding an incident in Kafr Zita, Hama, in October 2016. Currently, the FFM is continuing to analyse information collected from different deployments and is preparing for further deployments, subject to the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will issue additional reports in due course.
28. In relation to the OPCW Office located at the Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus—the Command Post—the Secretariat has reminded the Syrian Arab Republic that the inspector present there is replaced every six weeks under a mechanism of rotation. Since 17 April, the Secretariat has been requesting the necessary and usual issuance of visas for the incoming staff member. No response had been received from the Syrian Arab Republic for over three months. I therefore recalled the incumbent officer from Damascus back to The Hague on 21 June, given that she had already served at the OPCW Office in Damascus for more than double the usual six-week term. Her successor was sent to Beirut on 19 June to

await the issuance of a visa there from the Syrian Arab Republic. Given the lack of response, I also recalled this officer back to Headquarters on 3 July. Currently, the OPCW Office in Damascus remains manned only by support staff from UNOPS. Yesterday a note verbale was received announcing that the visa was granted and could be collected at the border crossing with Lebanon. Given the overall context that I have described, I decided to send a letter on 24 June to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the National Authority, Dr Faisal Mekdad, inviting him to an in-person meeting with me after the summer. I proposed to the Minister that two senior officials be appointed, one by him and one by me, and that they be charged with working on the preparations of the agenda during the coming weeks. The Secretariat will continue to engage with Syria to continue deployments of the DAT, the FFM, and inspections of the SSRC.

29. I will now turn to destruction-related activities.
30. Verification at chemical weapons destruction facilities in the United States of America has continued, thanks to modifications that ensure the health and safety of inspectors and personnel on site in COVID-19 times. As at 30 June, the Secretariat had verified the destruction by possessor States Parties of a total of 71,372 metric tonnes (MT), or 98.71%, of a total of 72,304.339 MT.
31. China and Japan have continued bilateral consultations on the excavation, recovery, and destruction of abandoned chemical weapons (ACW) at various sites in China. Excavation, recovery, and destruction operations in Haerbaling resumed in May 2021. Activities at other sites remain suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspections related to these activities will take place later in the year when conditions allow, in consultation with the concerned States Parties.
32. The Secretariat remains in close contact with China and Japan regarding the latest developments on these matters. The thirty-fourth trilateral meeting between China, Japan, and the Secretariat was held online on 30 March 2021. The objectives of trilateral meetings are to ensure transparency, to discuss technical and practical issues, to implement projects in accordance with the appropriate verification measures, and to plan for future activities.
33. As at 20 June 2021, around 83,700 items of ACW had been recovered, of which 57,701 items had been reported as destroyed.
34. Since the last session of the Council, the Secretariat conducted three old chemical weapons inspections in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.
35. As reported in my Note to the Council at this session (EC-97/DG.1), only 84 of the planned 241 Article VI inspections (34%) were completed in 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, 241 Article VI inspections are again mandated. To date, 14 of these inspections have been conducted, with the aim of gradually ramping up inspections according to the conditions of the evolving global pandemic.
36. The Secretariat will continue to give priority to inspections of Schedule 1 facilities and initial inspections of Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 plant sites.

37. On 2 July, I presented the biennial Draft Programme and Budget for 2022–2023 to States Parties. This budget represents the first biennial programme and budget for the Organisation following the Conference decision in 2019 (C-24/DEC.11) requesting the Organisation to transition to this form of budget preparation.
38. In the interim period, the Secretariat developed and implemented the internal structures necessary to enable this transition. With a biennial programme and budget, a number of tangible benefits are being gained. These include longer-term planning, increased focus on programme implementation, as well as achieving efficiency in the budget preparation approval process.
39. With regard to the Secretariat's current financial situation, the External Auditor has confirmed that the OPCW has incurred a cash deficit of EUR 1.2 million in 2019. This is mainly due to non-payment of assessed contributions. This cash deficit will have to be addressed by the Conference.
40. Moving forward, as at 30 June 2021, the collection level for 2021 assessed contributions was 56.24%, compared to 62.35% on the same date last year. Notably, cash inflows are again considerably lower than forecast. Should this situation continue, the Working Capital Fund may have to be used within this quarter to maintain operational liquidity. The Secretariat is closely monitoring the Organisation's cash position as well as the impact of the pandemic on programme implementation.
41. I must reiterate the importance for all States Parties of paying your assessed contributions and other reimbursable costs for inspection activities as early as possible. As an example, the total outstanding contributions for the five States Parties with the biggest arrears is more than EUR 31 million, which represents 82% of the total outstanding contributions of more than EUR 37 million.
42. States Parties will continue to be kept informed of the Organisation's cash position through the Secretariat's monthly financial situation reports.
43. I also wish to emphasise that the zero nominal growth policy has generated a situation of continued loss of purchasing power, amounting to more than 20% over the last 10 years, owing to the increase in mandatory costs.
44. In recent years, so-called cash surpluses that are the result of late payments of assessed contributions have arisen and were reallocated by Conference decision to finance special funds covering a number of high-priority programmatic areas. In doing so, States Parties' assessment levels have remained constant.
45. However, the current cash deficit position, coupled with inflationary operating costs year over year, has necessitated an increase in assessed contributions in order to finance the Draft Programme and Budget for 2022–2023.
46. States Parties will have the opportunity to discuss the Draft Programme and Budget during the facilitation process that will start in September.
47. The Fiftieth Session of the Advisory Body on Administrative and Financial Matters (ABAF) was held from 1 to 4 June 2021. It covered a number of important areas, including the 2020 Financial Statements, the ChemTech Centre Project, and a review of the financial position of the Organisation for the current year.

48. A decision was adopted during the second part of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference appointing the Comptroller and Auditor General of India as the External Auditor for the period 2021 to 2023. The decision further requests the Council to establish, as early as possible, a working group to come up with a proposal on how to appoint the External Auditor of the OPCW in the future.
49. The Secretariat's human resources enable the effective implementation of our mandates. Retaining and developing knowledge and skills will be critical to succeeding in this evolving security, scientific, and technical landscape.
50. I wish to thank Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus of Australia and Ambassador Laura Dupuy of Uruguay for facilitating States Parties' discussions on several internal governance topics, including the tenure policy and knowledge management.
51. I have noted the circulation of the revised draft decision on the Organisation's tenure policy. I have been encouraged by the increasing understanding by the States Parties of the practicality of having greater flexibility, for both contract extensions and the re-hiring of former staff members after several years of break in service. This is the way our partner organisations, the IAEA and the CTBTO, operate, while both retaining their non-career character. The multiple presentations and provision of information by the Secretariat have been instrumental in this respect. At the same time, I have registered the connections that have been made between this process and our efforts to achieve gender balance and greater geographical diversity at the Secretariat. I wish to emphasise that the possible adaptations to the tenure policy are an instrument aimed at achieving greater efficiency for the Secretariat, not a vehicle for promoting gender or geographical diversity of staff. Regarding the latter, I can assure States Parties of my continued and unwavering commitment, as demonstrated by the numerous adaptations to our advertising and recruitment policies.
52. Building capacity to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons, including their use by non-State actors, continues to be an important area of focus.
53. In this regard, the Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism met virtually on 5 July, under the Chairpersonship of Ambassador Madonsela of South Africa.
54. During the meeting, States Parties learned about training possibilities the Secretariat offers to strengthen their legislative and regulatory frameworks for chemical security.
55. The Organisation has also undertaken projects to respond to the dual challenges of increasing cybersecurity threats and remote working, in order to keep the Secretariat connected and secure. We continue to invest in cybersecurity assurance through financial, training, and policy improvement means.
56. Overall, the Organisation continues to face a high number of sophisticated and targeted cyberattacks. It is critical to continue with efforts to ensure that OPCW operations are protected and secure. I recall the establishment of a Special Fund for Security and Business Continuity in 2020, and am pleased to share that during the intersessional period a further contribution agreement of EUR 500,000 was signed with France. I also welcome the announcement by the European Union of its intention to contribute a further EUR 2.1 million. This will enhance the capabilities that serve as an important foundation of the Organisation's digital resilience, and I continue to invite others to contribute.

57. The Secretariat has started looking into its environmental footprint, and will seek ways to reduce it through a zero-emissions building.
58. I am pleased to report that the new extranet platform is ready to be launched. Delegations will be invited to test the platform following this session of the Council. It will be available to all States Parties on 1 August 2021.
59. There were changes in the Senior Management during the intersessional period.
60. I am pleased to take this opportunity to warmly welcome to the Secretariat our newly appointed Legal Adviser, Ms Hafida Lahiouel.
61. At the same time, we bid farewell to Mr Kai Chen, the outgoing Director of our External Relations Division. On behalf of the Secretariat, I would like to thank him for his dedicated service and convey to him our best wishes.
62. There have been many changes in my now three years at the helm of the OPCW. During this period, the Organisation has adapted and evolved to meet the challenges of a new security environment. We have continued to deliver results with limited resources. The global pandemic further underscored the Secretariat's agility to adapt to unprecedented and unpredictable circumstances.
63. Looking to the future, we need to ensure that the Organisation remains well equipped to address all types of chemical weapons threats, including those from non-State actors, and to further develop the capacities of its Member States to counter these threats at the national level. We will sharpen our focus on prevention of the re-emergence of chemical weapons in support of global security.
64. The ChemTech Centre will play an important role in this regard, as it will enable us to keep pace with advances in science and technology. The Centre will embody the commitment of States Parties to the Convention and be an unparalleled knowledge repository for chemical weapons disarmament, and the peaceful and authorised use of chemistry.
65. States Parties can rely on the Secretariat's dedication and on my personal commitment to a strong and effective OPCW in the years ahead.