



Remarks by the Director-General of the OPCW, Fernando Arias, at the 23rd International Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation Conference (CWD)

As delivered on 2 November 2021, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Madam the Minister of State for Defence,
Mr Chief Executive of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL),
Co-hosts of this prestigious and well-established event.
Madam Assistant Secretary of Defense of the United States of America,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to thank the Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) for organising this Conference.

This event has long been a critical platform for convening experts from around the globe to focus on one common objective: achieving a world free of chemical weapons. This is the purpose of the Chemical Weapons Convention and the OPCW's founding goal.

Much has been achieved since the Convention's entry into force 24 years ago. There are 193 States Parties to the Convention and over 98% of the world's population live under its protections.

Today, 98.85%, of a total of 72,304 metric tonnes of declared chemical weapons have been verifiably destroyed. The last possessor state, the United States of America, is on track to complete the destruction of its declared stockpiles by 2023.

Despite this success, the use of chemical weapons in Iraq, Malaysia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom in the last years, demonstrate that these weapons remain an insidious threat. In addition, we continue to address the very real concern that non-State actors may acquire and employ toxic chemicals for hostile purposes.

Looking forward, the challenges the OPCW is facing strike at the core objectives of the Convention. They will shape the future agenda of the Organisation, an agenda that will be open forever.

In 2021, the OPCW entered its eighth year of engagement in the Syrian Arab Republic. During this period, the Organisation has invested a great deal of time, attention, and resources in efforts to deliver on the mandates given by the States Parties regarding the Syrian chemical weapons dossier.

In 2018, the Conference of the States Parties decided to mandate the Secretariat of the OPCW with putting in place arrangements to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons use in Syria.

The Investigation and Identification Team, or IIT, was created in accordance with that decision and has been conducting its mandated activities since June 2019.

On 8 April 2020, the Secretariat released the first report of the IIT. This report concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the Syrian Arab Air Force used chemical weapons in Ltamenah, Syria, on three occasions, in March 2017. Sarin was used in two attacks, and chlorine was used in one attack.

Following the issuance of the first IIT report, the Executive Council of the OPCW adopted a decision in July 2020. It requested the Syrian Arab Republic to declare to the Secretariat, within 90 days, the chemical weapons used in the attacks in Ltamenah. Under that decision, Syria was also requested to declare all the chemical weapons it currently possesses, and to resolve all of the outstanding issues regarding its initial declaration.

On 12 April 2021, the second report of the IIT was issued on an incident that took place in Saraqib, Syria, on 4 February 2018. It reached the conclusion 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 chlorine cylinder. Currently, the IIT is investigating five further cases and will issue reports on them in due course.

On 21 April this year, the Conference of the States Parties adopted a decision entitled “Addressing the Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic”.

Through this decision, the Conference suspends the following rights and privileges of the Syrian Arab Republic:

- to vote in the Conference and the Council;
- to stand for election to the Council; and
- to hold any office of the Conference, the Council or any subsidiary organs of the OPCW.

These rights and privileges will only be reinstated once I have reported to the Executive Council that Syria has completed the measures I already mentioned, decided upon by the Council in July last year.

It is regrettable that Syria has not been the only place where chemical weapons have been employed in recent years.

In 2018, a chemical weapon was used in Salisbury, and in Amesbury, in the United Kingdom. Five individuals were directly poisoned, one of whom fatally.

The Secretariat dispatched a team of experts at the request of the United Kingdom. The team confirmed the findings regarding the chemical formula of the nerve agent used, namely a chemical of the novichok family, through an independent analysis of the samples collected in Salisbury and Amesbury.

As perhaps you know, the Chemical Weapons Convention established three lists, the so-called schedules 1, 2 and 3, containing the most dangerous chemicals. All those chemicals included in the lists are subject to declaration by the possessor states and inspections by the Secretariat of the Organisation.

Following the events I referred to in Salisbury, the schedules of chemicals listed in the Convention were amended by the Conference of the States Parties, in November 2019, adding several chemicals belonging to the family of novichok nerve agent. It was the first time since the entry into force of the Convention that this list was amended. In doing so, States Parties proved that they are able to update the treaty to respond to new challenges and risks, which, unfortunately, continue to emerge.

On 20 August 2020, a Russian citizen and political activist, Mr Alexei Navalny, was poisoned in Russia. Mr Navalny was transported to Berlin where he was treated.

On 4 September 2020, in response to a request from the Federal Republic of Germany, a team of experts from the Secretariat travelled to Berlin, and independently collected biomedical samples from Mr Navalny, with his consent, for analysis by OPCW designated laboratories. The results of the analysis confirmed that traces were found in Mr Navalny's blood of a nerve agent, with similar structural characteristics as the toxic chemicals of the novichok family that were added to the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention.

On 6 October 2020, the Secretariat received a request from the Russian Federation for a technical assistance visit concerning the same incident. Correspondence regarding this request was exchanged between the Secretariat and the Russian Federation, and made available on the OPCW public website. As the request did not meet the necessary requirements for the Secretariat to assist the Russian Federation in a way similar to how it has assisted other States Parties, the visit did not take place.

These cases cast a light on a long-standing and a long-term goal of the OPCW – the prevention of the re-emergence of chemical weapons and their use. Vital to the OPCW's efforts to realise this objective will be keeping up with the rapid developments in the chemical sciences and relevant areas of technology.

Despite the challenges of the last decade, the continuing strength, relevance, and adaptability of the Chemical Weapons Convention is clear.

As we grow closer to achieving the goal of eliminating all the declared chemical weapons stockpiles, the OPCW is aware that its task is unfinished. Various threats, current and new, pose very serious risks we need to tackle.

The OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology, or ChemTech Centre, is being constructed close to the OPCW Headquarters in The Hague. The ChemTech Centre will be an essential tool in the efforts to face those challenges.

The benefits of this new facility for States Parties are clear. It will be a recognised leader in research, analysis, training, and capacity building. It will play an important role in preserving and developing knowledge and skills related to chemical weapons, and in ensuring that the Organisation remains fit for purpose in the future.

The Centre will allow the Organisation to meet the needs of States Parties by providing capacity building in chemical security and assistance and protection, and by fostering international cooperation to guarantee the peaceful uses of chemistry. It will allow us to keep pace with

developments in science and technology and to ensure that our robust verification regime incorporates and benefits from technological advancements.

The construction of the Centre has advanced steadily as scheduled and on budget. The placement of the first pillar ceremony of the Centre was held on 23 September 2021 to officially mark the start of the construction. The construction of the ChemTech Centre is currently planned to be completed by the end of 2022, and the facility will become operational by the spring of 2023.

The funding target for this Centre has also been met, with over EUR 33.65 million contributed or pledged from 50 countries, the European Union, and other donors. The United Kingdom has contributed with about 1 million pounds to the project, which I sincerely appreciate. I wish to express my deep gratitude to all contributors for their generous support.

The ChemTech Centre Trust Fund remains open for further contributions, which we have started receiving. Such additional donations will provide extra assurances for the successful completion of the project, and for international cooperation activities to be carried out at the Centre, as soon as the building is operational. In this regard, I started preliminary consultations several months ago with States Parties and regional groups to hear their priorities, ideas and proposals for the activities to be delivered at the Centre.

The ChemTech Centre demonstrates how the OPCW continues to evolve and adapt to States Parties' needs and to the changing security landscape. It will enhance the Organisation ability to keep in touch with the latest developments in science and technology and ahead of the existing and emerging chemical threats.

The spectre of chemical terrorism continues to loom over us and demands more effective coordination and improved national implementation of the Convention. Within the OPCW, the Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism has been the main platform for States Parties to discuss and exchange best practices on non-State actors.

The OPCW is also supporting States Parties in developing national implementing legislation, which is critical in preventing non-state actors from acquiring chemical weapons. Presently, 118 of our 193 Member States, or 61%, have now reported enacting legislation covering all the initial measures. But this leaves a sizeable gap, which clearly needs to be closed. The effectiveness of legislative and other regulatory measures is critical to the enforcement of the Convention.

Our work with other international organisations is also contributing to the fight against terrorism. The OPCW's activities to tackle the threat from non-State actors are thus a comprehensive and enduring task, which underscores the complexity of this issue.

In 2020, the OPCW continued its participation in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact and in the Compact's Working Group on Emerging Threats and Critical Infrastructure Protection.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The complete elimination of the possibility of the use of chemical weapons is at the core of the Convention – there are no exceptions, it is absolute in its scope.

Next year, the OPCW will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention. This will be a moment to reflect on what has been achieved, as well as an opportunity to consider existing and future challenges for the Organisation.

Our world today is very different from the one in 1997, when the Organisation was founded. To meet challenges, it is imperative for us to keep adapting and evolving in an ever-changing global landscape.

Preventing re-emergence of chemical weapons will require the commitment and efforts of all stakeholders: governments, industry, civil society, scientists and international organisations. You can count on the OPCW to continue working with you to uphold and reinforce the norm against the use of chemical weapons.

I thank you for your attention.
