



UN Chronicle op-ed: ‘All stakeholders have a role to play in ridding the world of chemical weapons’

By the Director-General of the OPCW, Ambassador Fernando Arias

26 July 2022

On 29 April this year, we marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction (the Chemical Weapons Convention), and the establishment of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) as the Convention's implementing body.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is an international, multilateral treaty whose main objective is to exclude completely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons, with zero tolerance. Its existence is the result of determined international efforts dating back to the seventeenth century, when France and Germany prohibited the use of poisoned bullets.

The Convention is also the product of more than a decade of diplomatic negotiations that commenced in 1980, as well as years of advocacy work involving academia, civil society, industry and governments. Its opening for signature in Paris in 1993 marked the culmination of an exhaustive multistakeholder process. This was a historic achievement in the field of disarmament. For the first time, States agreed never, under any circumstances, to develop, produce, acquire, stockpile, transfer or use chemical weapons, and to verifiably destroy their chemical arsenals.

The process of destroying chemical arsenals declared to OPCW will soon be completed. However, current global events have underscored that preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons is on an agenda that will remain open forever.

Looking back—what has been achieved?

The accomplishments of OPCW in the last 25 years are clear, concrete and lasting. As of today, 193 countries have joined the Chemical Weapons Convention, which means that 98 per cent of the world's population is covered by its protection. In addition, more than 99 per cent of all declared chemical weapon stockpiles have been verifiably and irreversibly destroyed. The last possessor State party to the Convention is expected to complete the destruction of its stockpile in 2023. Likewise, significant progress has been made under OPCW supervision to destroy the chemical weapons abandoned during the Second World War.

Additionally, OPCW continues to make strides in tackling another challenge: reducing the risk of dangerous chemicals falling into the wrong hands. Each day, the ever-thriving chemical industry utilizes large amounts of dangerous "dual-use" chemicals for peaceful and entirely legitimate purposes. In this context, OPCW has conducted some 4,232 industry inspections to date in over 80 States parties to guarantee that the production of such chemicals remains solely for authorized purposes.

Beyond its activities in disarmament and non-proliferation, OPCW supports the peaceful uses of chemistry through a wide range of practical programmes for international cooperation. These include activities to strengthen national legislation as well as training programmes to enhance the skills of first responders in chemical emergency response and management, improve the expertise of customs officials and increase preparedness for better protection against toxic chemicals.

The accomplishments of OPCW have not gone unnoticed. In 2013, the Organisation was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its "extensive efforts to eliminate" chemical weapons.

A quarter century after opening its doors, however, formidable challenges to OPCW persist. The Organisation's response to those challenges is shaping its present focus and will define its future.

Current and future challenges: Preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed violations of the global norm against the use of chemical weapons in Iraq, Malaysia, Russia, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Kingdom.

The most egregious and widespread breaches of the norm have occurred with the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The accession of Syria to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013 generated a special but unfinished task. This is the ninth year of OPCW engagement on the Syrian chemical weapons dossier, and it is worrisome that this matter is still not closed.

In all of these situations, OPCW has taken action. In the case of Syria, the States parties, through decisions of the OPCW policymaking organs, have resolutely demanded that Syria redress its failure to declare and destroy all its chemical weapons and chemical weapons production facilities. The OPCW secretariat continues to implement the mandates it has received through these decisions.

Other recent incidents, such as the attempted poisoning of the Skripal family in Salisbury, United Kingdom in 2018 and Alexei Navalny in 2020 are also deeply troubling. The OPCW secretariat provided technical assistance to the United Kingdom and Germany to confirm the identity of the chemical warfare agents used in the incidents.

These cases of chemical weapons use highlight another issue of serious concern: the potential acquisition and misuse of toxic chemicals by non-State actors. It has been well documented, for example, that ISIL deployed chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq on several occasions. To tackle this threat, OPCW has been promoting information exchange and experience-sharing among its member States to counter the dangers posed by non-State actors.

The chemical industry all over the world has been growing, both in the number of plants built and in technical sophistication; this adds further risks. In particular, the management of hazardous substances over their life cycle presents an additional challenge. The goal, therefore, must be to prevent such substances from being diverted to cause harm to people, infrastructure and the environment at every stage of the process: research, development, production, commercialization and transportation, storage and use.

In addressing this issue, our first line of defence remains the strengthening of the implementation of the Convention at the national level. States parties are responsible for

enacting and enforcing necessary legislation in line with national constitutional processes. This effort requires the active involvement and commitment of various national actors and institutions, including parliaments and the judiciary, as well as ministries of foreign affairs, defence, the interior, trade, industry and science, among others. Through its assistance and cooperation programmes, the OPCW secretariat supports States parties in this endeavour.

Keeping pace with scientific and technological progress

At the same time, OPCW is keeping up with the impressive speed of scientific and technological development by constantly strengthening the capacities of its staff to ensure that they can deliver on our mandates efficiently and effectively.

The new OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology, currently being built in the outskirts of The Hague, will be an integral part of this endeavour. The Centre, which is broadly supported by OPCW member States, will allow us to conduct research, analysis and training, and to deliver a variety of international cooperation and assistance activities with a view to better implementing the Convention.

The construction of the Centre is expected to be completed by the end of 2022 and the facility will be inaugurated in the spring of 2023. The Centre will serve as a testament to the international community's commitment to contribute to peace and security, and a demonstration that the OPCW secretariat has continued delivering its mandates despite the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

Looking forward: All stakeholders must play their part

The success of OPCW over the past 25 years is the result of the dedication and efforts of its member States, its staff and other partners.

While the challenges are significant, the presiding norm against the use of chemical weapons has remained strong. The taboo is solid and universal.

Yet we must remain vigilant and, if necessary, ready to take action to address any alleged or proven violation of the norm.

Today, there are fears and threats of the use of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons, in Ukraine. It must be recalled that all 193 States parties to Convention, including the Russian Federation and Ukraine, have solemnly and voluntarily committed to uphold its strict obligations.

The spirit of multistakeholder collaboration and cooperation that led to the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention a quarter century ago is still very strong, and it is critical that all stakeholders—including governments, civil society, academia, the chemical industry and the entire international community—continue to play their part.
