



Welcome Remarks by the Deputy Director-General of the OPCW, Ms Odette Melono, at the United Nations Disarmament Fellowship Programme

As delivered on 23 September 2022, The Hague, Netherlands

Distinguished Fellows,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to once again welcome the UN Disarmament Fellowship Programme and its participants to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs for organising this valuable programme.

The lessons and experiences that you, dear fellows, are acquiring will be vital to your work in arms control, especially at a time when the world faces new and immense challenges in this field.

International arms control is at a crucial moment in time. When the Chemical Weapons Convention was concluded in 1992, it was hailed as a significant disarmament accomplishment of the immediate post-Cold War era. That period was marked by a constructive and cooperative international environment that enabled multilateralism to thrive and produce major achievements in international disarmament and non-proliferation.

Today the situation is very different. Geopolitical instability, mistrust, and tension prevails, creating an international state of affairs where multilateral efforts often give way to national interests. In the disarmament sphere previously concluded agreements and commitments have been weakened or completely terminated, while consensus in many diplomatic fora has become elusive.

Despite this adverse climate for international cooperation the CWC and the OPCW is a resounding success. Since 1997, over 99% of 72,000 metric tonnes of declared stockpiles of the most lethal chemical warfare agents known to humankind have been completely destroyed.

In addition, our universality activities have been remarkably successful – today 193 countries are States Parties to the Convention. This makes it the most widely adhered to disarmament treaty in the world. Only four countries have yet to join, and we are working to encourage them to take up the commitments that the rest of the world has embraced.

We have also been expending considerable efforts to oversee the full and effective implementation of the CWC's verification regime. With more than 4,300 inspections of industrial sites as well as 3,200 inspections of chemical destruction facilities we continue to build confidence in the global adherence to the Convention.

Even though many of these accomplishments have occurred outside the public eye, they have not gone unnoticed by the international community. In 2013 the Organisation was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons.

We recognise, however, that these accomplishments by no means should be taken for granted. In recent years, we have seen the international norm against the use of chemical weapons coming under increasing pressure. This has been evident in the employment of chemical warfare agents in places such as Iraq, Malaysia, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and of course in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Our work in Syria, in particular, is ongoing and is now in its ninth year. Unfortunately, the Syrian chemical weapons dossier is far from closed. Later this afternoon you will receive a comprehensive presentation on the OPCW's ongoing activities in that country.

Accordingly, we must continue to maintain and strengthen the Convention to meet the OPCW's long-term objective of preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

2023 will be a critical year for the OPCW as we complete our five-year review cycle which will culminate in the Fifth Review Conference in May. This will be a moment to take stock of our achievements and set a course for the OPCW's future, specifically with respect to the new priorities and challenges for the Convention.

I would like to stress that although the complete destruction of all declared chemical arsenals is near at hand, paradoxically the threat of use of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals is ever-present. The devastating potential of chemical terrorism has been well known to the international community ever since the Tokyo subway gas attacks of 1995. Today, we have witnessed attacks by non-State actors in Iraq and Syria. Countering chemical terrorism requires a broad and comprehensive approach involving multiple stakeholders such as chemical industry, the scientific community, other international organisations, and diplomats like yourselves.

Another enduring issue for the OPCW is monitoring and keeping on top of advances in science and technology. The OPCW is essentially a technical organisation in nature and is founded on and guided by science in general and chemistry in particular.

The Organisation must therefore, as a key priority, keep up-to-date with the latest developments and breakthroughs that can impact its activities for better or worse. The Scientific Advisory Board, which is made up of eminent experts from our member states, is our key vehicle for this.

At the same time, the OPCW recognises that it must continue to strengthen its position as a platform for expert dialogue, exchange, and collaboration in the chemical sciences. Our new Centre for Chemistry and Technology, located near the Hague, will play a vital role in this respect, and keep the Organisation fit-for-purpose well into the future.

The Centre will provide a new, high-quality toolbox for the Organisation to oversee chemical research, analysis, and enhanced training to support and reinforce the OPCW's verification regime, including its inspection capabilities. The inauguration of the Centre, which will take place next spring, will truly be a game-changer for the way in which the OPCW carries out its core functions.

Dear Disarmament Fellows,

Over the course of 25-years, the OPCW has been successfully fulfilling its main objective of eliminating all declared chemical weapons. The Organisation has demonstrated that multilateral disarmament can deliver concrete outcomes for peace and security through sustained and collective efforts.

Going forward, necessity will require the OPCW to deepen its focus on preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons. In many ways this will be a very different undertaking to our disarmament activities. It will be conducted in a new and more complex security landscape in which the Organisation must constantly adapt and evolve to a range of emerging international challenges.

This is not a situation unique to the OPCW, but is rather a common feature of the current arms control architecture. As diplomats just starting in the disarmament world, I hope that the briefings you hear today will help you draw insights and lessons that will benefit not only your future careers but also the international disarmament community as a whole.

I thank you.
