



Speech by Director-General of the OPCW, Ambassador Fernando Arias, at the 25th Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation Conference (CWD)

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Dr Paul Hollinshead, Chief Executive of Porton Down,

Distinguished Participants,

It is an honour to open, once again, this important annual gathering on chemical weapons demilitarisation. I wish to thank the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory for inviting me to address this event, which brings together some of the best minds in this field.

For twenty-five years, this conference has been a platform for policymakers, diplomats, and experts in the chemical weapons field, to discuss and exchange information.

This year's conference is significant as it coincides with several landmarks for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The most relevant moments are: 12 May, inauguration of the building of the new Centre for Chemistry and Technology of the OPCW, with the august presence of His Majesty Willem Alexander, King of the Netherlands. This same day, we will commemorate that the Convention for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was opened for signature in Paris, 30 years ago. Another important event, also this month from the 15th to the 19th, is the Fifth Review Conference of the 193 States Parties.

During this year, we will reach the much expected moment of the end of the destruction of all declared chemical weapons of the Member States. There are good reasons to be satisfied with these achievements. The progress made towards a world free of chemical weapons is incontestable.

However, this is not a moment for self-complacency. As we are now facing new risks and threats, that present relevant difficulties to be addressed.

The common task, to maintain peace and international security, has become more demanding. Armed conflicts are growing, in number and intensity. Geopolitical tensions are on the rise and multilateral institutions and mechanisms are being abrogated, weakened, or ignored.

Disarmament and non-proliferation instruments have come under significant pressure. As an example, in February we witnessed the suspension of the New START Treaty, one of the last major nuclear arms agreements between Russia and the United States.

A total of 72,053 metric tonnes of the most dangerous poisons has already been destroyed under the stringent verification of the OPCW. There is a small remaining part to be destroyed in the United States, where more than 99.33% of its total declared stockpile has already been destroyed. As such, the United States is on track to complete its total chemical demilitarisation process by September 2023.

The imminent realisation of the Convention's first disarmament objective will be an accomplishment for arms control and a triumph for multilateralism. Nevertheless, efforts to eliminate chemical weapons do not stop there. China and Japan, continue their cooperation, to destroy the chemical weapons abandoned by Japan on Chinese territory during World War Two. To date, Japan has destroyed 65,894 of the 97,539 items declared as ACWs in China.

Additionally, to date I recall that 19 States Parties have declared the possession of old chemical weapons, which continue to be discovered and reported to the OPCW. These old chemical weapons are being destroyed under verification by the Secretariat in accordance with the Convention.

Successes in chemical disarmament should not obscure the significant concerns regarding the use and threat of use of chemical weapons. In Syria, the population has suffered more than 10 years of conflict, including such atrocities as chemical weapons use. The chemical weapons dossier is far from closed and continues to demand the international community's attention.

On 27 January, the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) published its third report, containing the findings on the chemical weapons attack that took place in Douma, the Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018. The IIT report concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that at least one helicopter of the Syrian Arab Airforce dropped two cylinders containing chlorine, which hit two residential buildings in Douma. Forty-three named individuals were killed and dozens more were affected.

As mandated by the decision of the Conference of the States Parties in June 2018, I provided this report to the Executive Council of the Organisation and to the United Nations Secretary-General for their consideration. Together with the Coordinator of the IIT, I delivered a briefing to States Parties in The Hague on 2 February and another one to the United Nations Security Council on 7 February. It is now for the States Parties to decide how to proceed on this matter.

The Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the Organisation is also continuing its investigations into allegations of use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) of the Organisation continues its work to clarify the shortcomings noted in Syria's initial declaration. I have to underline, that Syria acceded the Organisation in 2013, and there are still 20 outstanding issues, some of them very relevant.

The Secretariat's attempts to organise the 25th round of consultations between DAT and the Syrian National Authority remain unsuccessful. This is because Syria against its obligations continues to refuse to issue an entry visa to the lead technical expert of the DAT and continues to require the Secretariat to pay for Syria's travel and accommodation costs. After several reminders, without positive results, the Secretariat decided to carry out Limited In-Country Activities in January 2023, deploying a reduced team of the DAT to Syria and another one in April. I wish to recall that under the Convention, UN Security Council resolution 2118, and the relevant decisions of the OPCW policy-making organs, Syria has the obligation to provide full and unfettered access to personnel designated by the OPCW.

Along with Syria, the risk of use of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons in Ukraine, is a stark reminder of the need for strong international disarmament instruments such as the Chemical Weapons Convention. We continue to closely monitor the

situation in Ukraine and we remain in contact with the Permanent Representations of the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

The Secretariat has been providing assistance and protection, training and advising Ukrainian experts, at its request, under Article X. We are also supplying them with chemical detection equipment and training on using these devices. In addition, procurement of equipment and training to develop Ukrainian laboratory expertise is also under consideration.

At the same time, we also devote special attention, on non-traditional threats, such as chemical terrorism. In January 2023, for instance, we read reports of a foiled terror attack in Germany where the suspects were planning to use cyanide and ricin. The OPCW contributes to global anti-terrorism efforts and is building on the synergies that exist with other international organisations. The Organisation maintains its cooperation with global entities, such as the 1540 Committee, as well as the UN Office of Counter Terrorism. We also continue to lead a joint international project with several UN bodies, entitled with the following long title ‘Ensuring, Effective Inter-Agency Interoperability, and Coordinated Communication, in Case of Chemical, and/or Biological Attacks’.

The prevention of the re-emergence of chemical weapons will remain as an open agenda, forever. Advances in science and technology, including artificial intelligence and biomediated chemical processes with new chemicals and equipment, present relevant new threats and risks.

In the next few years, the OPCW will concentrate its efforts in the programmes related to knowledge, skills, and capacity building. The goal will be to maintain a very high level of expertise in the Organisation. This will guarantee a robust verification system and will allow the possibility to provide the necessary trainings in different areas to the experts of the States Parties, at their request.

These changes in the scientific and technological landscape are blurring the lines between chemistry and biology. Consequently, the implementation of the Convention is increasingly becoming transdisciplinary.

Efforts to strengthen the OPCW’s inherent ability to adapt, have already begun. The Organisation’s new Centre for Chemistry and Technology, with its inauguration on 12 May, will be a vital tool in this regard.

The construction of the Centre, was completed last December, respecting the timeline, and the budget. This was achieved, despite all the obstacles related to COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the difficulties in the delivery of materials, and high inflation.

Through its activities, the Centre will:

- contribute to enhance the OPCW’s laboratory capabilities;
- increase and improve the programmes related to knowledge and training of Secretariat and States Parties experts;
- increase the scientific research, collaborating with specific partners.

The Centre is a force multiplier for the Organisation, and it will have a strong focus on international cooperation. Managing the knowledge, skills, and expertise in the Centre for Chemistry and Technology will be crucial because it will enable the Organisation to maintain its ability to conduct all types of operations, and also to support the States Parties to develop their capacity for better implementing the Convention.

The Chemical Weapons Convention was negotiated as a permanent ban, with unlimited duration, and with no reservations, with a goal of a total elimination of chemical weapons, meaning zero tolerance, and total destruction of the chemical weapons stockpiles of the States Parties.

This year the OPCW celebrates its 26th anniversary.

It is now up to all of us, to consolidate and strengthen our disarmament gains, and stay the course, we started in 1997, to exclude completely the possibility of the use of this type of abhorrent weapons.

I wish you all a productive and substantive conference.

Thank you.
