



Keynote Speech by the Director-General of the OPCW, Ambassador Fernando Arias, at the European Union Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Consortium

As delivered on 12 November 2024, in Brussels, Belgium

Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,

Thank you, Mr Nexon, for chairing this session. I wish to extend my gratitude to the European Union Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Consortium for organising this important conference. The participation of diplomats and experts from both near and far testifies to the great relevance of this timely event.

We meet at a time of increased geopolitical tensions, marked by complex conflicts. The war in Gaza started over a year ago, while the war in Ukraine is reaching the end of its third year. The current strain on the international system is deepening divides. Accordingly, the exchange of ideas and viewpoints that take place in conferences such as this, are critical to guiding decision-making.

When I took up my duties as Director-General one of my first activities was to travel to Brussels to participate in the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference on the 18th of December 2018. Since then, the world, the EU, and the OPCW have experienced significant changes.

The Organisation has reached major objectives and confronted serious challenges. In July 2023, we reached a historic milestone, verifying in the United States of America the complete destruction of all declared chemical weapons stockpiles in the world. This marked the elimination of an entire category of declared weapons of mass destruction.

In the meantime, our work continues in relation to verifying the destruction of chemical weapons abandoned by Japan in China at the end of the Second World War. I must acknowledge that this means that we have a monumental task before us for the coming years. Indeed, more than 100,000 abandoned chemical weapons, containing chemical agents and explosives, still active in most cases, remain to be destroyed.

In terms of universality, the Chemical Weapons Convention continues to be the most widely adhered to disarmament treaty in the world, with 193 States Parties to it. And we hope to soon welcome South Sudan as the 194th State Party. On this point, I wish to thank the European Union for its support in our universality activities. We will never be completely free of the chemical weapons threat until all countries have acceded to the Convention.

We now often hear that we are in the post-destruction phase. This is true, if we consider the destruction of the declared stockpiles of chemical weapons. But what we must bear in mind is that two very important members of the Organisation, China and Japan, continue to make serious technical and personal efforts and to devote impressive financial resources to the

destruction of the abandoned weapons I mentioned earlier. At the moment we are placing a particular focus on preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

Distinguished participants,

Despite our progress, the use and threat of use of chemical weapons is an ongoing international concern. Over the past decade, such use has been documented in Iraq, Malaysia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation, and the United Kingdom.

In particular, our work in Syria began in 2013 and is still not complete. We continue to address the Syrian chemical weapons dossier through 3 teams: the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT).

For more than 10 years now, the DAT has strived to clarify the shortcomings in Syria's initial declaration. Of the 26 issues identified by the Secretariat, only seven have been resolved, while 19 remain outstanding, some of which are of serious concern. Two of these issues relate to the possible full-scale development and production of chemical weapons. This may have occurred at two declared chemical weapons-related sites, where no activity was supposed to have taken place, according to Syria. The inspectors of the Organisation detected relevant elements at those sites and put questions to Syria which, so far, have not been answered appropriately. Under the Convention, Syria is obligated to submit accurate and complete declarations of its chemical weapons programme. The Secretariat's mandate is to verify that this has indeed happened, and so far we have not been able to do so.

For its part, the Fact-Finding Mission is gathering information and analysing data regarding five groups of allegations covering over 15 incidents. As for the Investigation and Identification Team, it has issued four reports to date, identifying the Syrian Armed Forces as using chemical weapons in five instances, and identifying the terrorist group ISIL in one instance. This team continues with its investigations and will issue further reports in due course.

The identification of ISIL as a perpetrator of chemical attacks in Syria also highlights the ever-present risk posed by non-State actors. The Organisation has an Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism. It continues to play an important role in strengthening the Organisation's efforts to counter chemical terrorism. Its regular dialogue and collaboration among States Parties gives them a platform to reflect on ways forward in addressing the danger of non-State actors acquiring toxic chemicals for malicious purposes.

In Ukraine, both sides of the conflict have made numerous allegations against one another of use of chemical weapons, including riot control agents. For the first time in the history of the OPCW, two Member States of the Organisation are at war and accuse each other of chemical weapons use. Obviously, the use of any toxic chemical at war is prohibited under the Convention. The use of riot control agents, as a method of warfare, is also prohibited by the Convention. Consequently, neither Ukraine nor Russia are allowed to use riot control agents at war.

The Secretariat of the Organisation has been providing assistance and protection support to Ukraine, upon its request. This support includes training and advice to experts, as well as

procurement of protection and detection equipment. The financial resources devoted to this activity have so far reached over 2.5 million euro, from a special fund financed by voluntary contributions from States Parties.

Distinguished participants,

The rapid pace of scientific and technological change presents new challenges. To maintain its technical preparedness for the future and to meet the ongoing needs of the States Parties, the Organisation must adapt to these changes.

The new Centre for Chemistry and Technology of the Organisation was inaugurated last year in the presence of H.M. Willem-Alexander, King of the Netherlands. The Centre is already fully operational. It has been enhancing our ability to maintain a robust verification regime, to conduct research, analysis, and training, as well as delivering capacity-building programmes to the benefit of States Parties.

After a year of exploration and evaluation for a better understanding of artificial intelligence (AI) in the context of the Organisation, the Executive Council has decided to include an agenda item on ‘emerging technologies’ for all its future sessions. This is an important step, as it will allow for discussions that will assist the Member States in determining the direction of the OPCW in this area.

The Secretariat of the Organisation has adopted a proactive approach, as the cross-cutting technology of AI has an impact on several very relevant areas for us. The overarching impact of AI will have a direct effect for us, mainly in the following areas:

- Laboratory equipment automation;
- Powered AI 3D printing, for producing laboratory equipment;
- Nanotechnology that will reduce the size of the laboratories and, if used for malicious purposes, will be more difficult to detect;
- AI-powered cloud laboratories;
- Creation of formulas of new molecules of very dangerous toxic chemicals, thanks to the new algorithms combined with large language models and certain professional expertise;
- Drones powered with AI that will be able to deliver toxic chemicals in a dangerous efficient way;
- With AI the weaponisation and autonomous deployment of chemical agents will be easier and cheaper; and
- Disinformation capabilities will increase in an exponential way and easily allow to confuse and misguide people regarding sensitive aspects of work of the Organisation.

AI is truly transformational. It is enhancing the capabilities of other technologies while also accelerating advances across multiple fields; I have given a few examples.

The OPCW is a technical Organisation. The need to keep it abreast of the new developments in emerging technologies is now more important than ever before. No countermeasures can be adopted if the Organisation lacks the human, financial, and material means. The international community still has time to strengthen the existing partnerships and to adopt the necessary measures.

I just mentioned that with AI new formulas of extremely dangerous chemicals can be created. However, the next step to actually produce those chemicals is still a difficult one. For the production of these new chemicals, at the moment, relevant financial means, special equipment and significant expertise are necessary. It entails that the production is currently an extremely difficult task to be carried out by non-State actors. However, as the power of AI is developing rapidly, every indication is that soon, and we don't know exactly when, but soon, AI-powered production will be within the reach of more people.

In the last few months, we have been addressing the situation I mentioned through a number of actions. The OPCW's Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) has been evaluating AI's potential implications for the Convention for some time now. In June 2022, it held a workshop on AI in chemistry in partnership with the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry. In April this year, the Secretariat convened a key meeting with AI experts external to the Organisation, leading to a report that was shared with States Parties. In June, we launched the so called 'AI Research Challenge', to explore the possible benefits of AI to the Convention and the functioning of the Organisation. I would like to express my appreciation to the European Union and the United Kingdom for funding this initiative. Also in June, I participated as the keynote speaker in the conference in Berlin entitled "AI and Weapons of Mass Destruction", organised, with great success, by the German Federal Foreign Office. At the last July session of the Executive Council, I announced my decision to establish a Temporary Working Group on AI, following the recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Board.

We built on these efforts last month with the first-ever 'Global Conference on the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Advancing the Implementation of the CWC', held in Rabat, and co-organised by the Kingdom of Morocco and the OPCW. This conference, which was attended by over 160 participants from 46 States Parties, affirmed that AI will bring significant conceptual and practical changes to the Convention's implementation. Its outcomes will guide the efforts of the Secretariat and States Parties alike, to adapt to our new reality. The Secretariat will continue to work in this area throughout 2025 and will keep the States Parties informed of the progress and results.

Distinguished participants,

The situation I have referred to in a summary way highlights the need for the OPCW to remain vigilant and adaptable. Our work is far from complete and is ongoing. The full support from the States Parties and the international community remains essential to ensure that the CWC continues to be an effective arms control instrument.

The responsibility is on us to protect the legacy that we have received with this instrument of peace and security called the OPCW. As a vital partner in promoting global peace and security, the European Union's continued support for the OPCW is essential.

I wish to thank the EU and its Member States for everything they do to support the Organisation. And I express my appreciation to the Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Consortium, for organising this conference and granting me the privilege to be here today.
