



Keynote address by the Director-General of the OPCW, Fernando Arias, at the Twelfth Asser Institute Training Programme on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction

As delivered on 27 September 2021, The Hague, Netherlands

Distinguished participants,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome this opportunity to address the Twelfth Training Programme on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. I thank the organisers for their efforts to make this course another success. The OPCW has been supporting this course for some years now, and we are pleased to collaborate with T.M.C. Asser Institute again.

Tobias Asser was a leading legal scholar of his time and a firm believer in international law as a way to foster peace between nations. It is heartening therefore that the Institute maintains his legacy through programmes such as this one, which attract a range of professionals keen to expand their understanding of arms control.

Over the course of this week, you will hear from a number of experts in this and related fields, as well as experienced members of the OPCW staff. This time could not be more suitable for the study of the issues and dynamics impacting and driving global actions to address all types of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Those efforts are centred on the global disarmament and non-proliferation regime, which consists of a web of multilateral treaties, bilateral agreements, norms, and policies. Each instrument is aimed at eliminating or banning the use of some of the most harmful and indiscriminate weapons ever devised by humankind.

Years, if not decades, of pain-staking discussions, negotiations, and diplomacy went into constructing this framework. Yet, the situation regarding the international disarmament and non-proliferation regime is worrying.

In recent years, some of the key disarmament instruments have been weakened or even completely dismantled. Two years ago, the 30-year old Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty was dissolved. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) remains divided over outstanding disarmament commitments, threatening progress at the next NPT Review Conference. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has yet to enter into force, and this is still a distant prospect, since it was opened for signature 25 years ago. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, despite entering into force in January, has not been signed by a single nuclear-armed state.

Efforts to tackle bioweapons face their own challenges. The Biological Weapons Convention continues to serve as the principal instrument to ban and prevent the use of these weapons, but it does not contain a verification mechanism, notwithstanding efforts to create one.

Transparency measures, such as the 1992 Open Skies Treaty, have also been seriously damaged by the withdrawal of key states in the last 12 months, undermining strategic predictability.

At the same time, emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, bio-technology, and autonomous systems, add further complexity to arms control efforts.

It is against this backdrop, that the Chemical Weapons Convention has provided an example of effective disarmament multilateralism in action. At present the Convention has 193 States Parties, providing coverage of 98% of the world. In addition, towards completing the Convention's disarmament mission, considerable progress has been made.

Today, more than 98% of declared chemical weapons stockpiles, or close to some 70,000 metric tonnes of extremely poisonous weapons, have been destroyed under OPCW verification. The remaining declared stocks are being eliminated and the task of destruction will conclude in 2023. With this, the United States will finish its chemical demilitarisation process.

On top of this, the extensive nature of the Convention's verification system has helped build confidence and trust in its provisions among the States Parties. To date, we have conducted over 4,000 inspections to the chemical industry, to ensure relevant chemicals are used exclusively for purpose not prohibited by the Convention.

For these extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons, the OPCW received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013.

The Convention is a unique treaty as it embodies a total and verifiable ban on an entire category of weapons of mass destruction. But its ultimate aim goes beyond non-proliferation, since it envisages the complete destruction of chemical weapons, vigilance against their re-emergence and zero tolerance for their use.

Accordingly, the success of the implementation of the Convention will be determined by our work to sustain its objectives on the long term, ensuring that these horrific weapons are never used again. I must underline, that this is a task of an incredible high-order.

Recent events in Syria, Iraq, Malaysia, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation demonstrate that the threat of chemical weapons is still very much with us. Moreover, every day, thousands of tons of toxic chemicals are produced and used for entirely legitimate ends. Yet, the diversion of these substances for ill intent could cause serious harm.

At present, progress in science and technology allow to produce substances that, even in very small quantities, can produce immense suffering and damage. Additionally, the above-mentioned rapid advances in chemical science and technology, if not properly used, can increase the risk of accidents, with consequences for people, infrastructure, and the

environment. At the same time, it is imperative that States Parties remain able to continue to develop their chemical industries and to benefit from the international chemicals trade.

It is within this evolving global environment that the OPCW must continue to chart a way forward. With the destruction of declared stockpiles coming to an end, the Organisation must increase its focus on preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

The new OPCW's Centre for Chemistry and Technology, or ChemTech Centre, which is now being constructed, will play an important role in this regard.

The collective benefits for States Parties of this new facility are clear. The Centre will support the implementation of the Convention, notably in areas such as chemical security, assistance and protection, training, research, knowledge sharing, and response to new chemical weapons threat.

Progress in the construction of the ChemTech Centre is moving rapidly, and we expect its completion at the end of 2022. Its funding target has been met, with over EUR 33.65 million, financed by 50 countries, the European Union and other donors.

Just last week, the so-called "Placement of the First Pillar Ceremony" took place. It was attended by the Ambassadors from the States Parties, the Dutch authorities and a numerous group of other guests. Such a high attendance demonstrates the strong, collective support for this facility and the missions of the Organisation.

Dear participants,

Chemical disarmament represents a well-recognised international success to eradicate one of the world's deadliest weapons. The story of the OPCW and its activities to fulfil its mandate provides an example of how an organisation can adapt within an evolving global environment.

At the beginning of my statement, I detailed the pressure the disarmament regime is under, at this very moment. I hope you, as the next generation of arms control and disarmament practitioners take the opportunity of this course to enrich your thinking and deepen your knowledge in this field. It will empower you to better co-operate in addressing these challenges through collective and collaborative approaches.

I wish you all a fruitful and productive course and a successful personal career.

Thank you.
