

AUSTRALIA

STATEMENT BY DR GREGORY FRENCH

PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF AUSTRALIA TO THE OPCW

AT THE 106TH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Chairperson,

Australia commends and supports the leadership of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Director-General Arias and the Technical Secretariat for the professionalism, integrity, and impartiality demonstrated in supporting the implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Australia welcomes H.E. Mr Andrés Terán Parral's leadership in chairing the 106th Session of the Executive Council and assures him of our full support in conducting the work of this session.

Australia's commitment to the CWC remains strong and steadfast. Ridding the world of chemical weapons is a crucial part of our collective effort to maintain international peace and security. Australia will always work to uphold the global disarmament and non-proliferation regimes that underpin the international system based on agreed rules. We want each country – large or small – to operate by the same rules. Rules that we have all had a say in shaping. Rules that deter conflict and maintain international peace and security.

Looking back, the OPCW and the international community celebrated major milestones in 2023, including the verified destruction of the last declared chemical weapons stockpiles. Looking forward, serious challenges remain. As we navigate an ever-evolving threat landscape, the OPCW must retain its ability to respond to the use and threats of use of toxic chemicals by both State and non-State actors. We should also be mindful of the risks posed by scientific and technological advancements. While offering potential benefits, emerging technologies - such as artificial intelligence and additive manufacturing - could pose serious risks to the OPCW's mission. If these technologies fall into the wrong hands, they may be harnessed in a way that gives rise to new threats, including the resurgence of chemical weapons.

To ensure that the OPCW can respond to these challenges, Australia has proudly contributed to the OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology. The ChemTech Centre has enhanced the OPCW's threat responsiveness and strengthened international cooperation and capacity building. Australia was also proud to support the OPCW's first Table-Top Exercise on Chemical Terrorism in 2023 as a co-facilitator. We look forward to our continued cooperation with the Technical Secretariat and States Parties to ensure that the OPCW remains prepared to address these challenges.

Supporting our Pacific family remains a key priority for Australia. We are working closely with the OPCW and international partners to ensure Pacific voices are heard in The Hague and to strengthen CWC implementation and enhance chemical security in our region. We are also supporting international cooperation and capacity building through our OPCW Partnership Programme with Malaysia and working with Malaysian laboratories and the OPCW on a twinning program to increase laboratory capability within our region. In the broader WMD non-proliferation context, we are working with the United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs and UNSC 1540 Committee on regional capacity building. We thank China for hosting, and China and the European Union for co-funding, the recent UNSCR 1540 regional workshop in Beijing to support prevention of proliferation to and by non-State actors, that included many Pacific participants.

Australia strongly supports the impartial and independent work of the OPCW's Syria missions, including the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), and the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM). Established in 2018 in a manner completely consistent with the CWC and the OPCW's mandate, the IIT has delivered on its task to identify perpetrators of chemical weapon use in Syria. Australia remains deeply concerned by the findings of the IIT's third report identifying reasonable grounds to believe that the Syrian Arab Air Force conducted a chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria, on 7 April 2018. The IIT's fourth report identifying reasonable grounds to believe that ISIL perpetrated an attack using sulphur mustard in Marea, Syria, in September 2015 is likewise deeply troubling. Australia strongly condemns the Syrian Arab Republic's repeated use of chemical weapons, as it strongly condemns ISIL's use of these weapons. We call on Syria to cooperate with the Technical Secretariat in good faith, answer the nineteen outstanding issues on its initial declaration, and comply with its CWC obligations. We reaffirm our support for the decision at the 28th Session of the Conference of the States Parties to address chemical weapons use by Syria and non-state actors.

Australia strongly condemns Russia for its illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine, which violates international law, including the UN Charter. We deplore Russia's bombing of chemical production facilities in Ukraine and its targeted disinformation campaign that seeks to spread false allegations of chemical weapons use. We remain deeply concerned by credible reports of Russia's repeated use of riot control agents and scheduled chemical substances as a method of warfare in Ukraine. These actions, which are prohibited by the Convention, are utterly unacceptable. We urge Russia to comply with its CWC obligations and respond to requests submitted under Article IX, paragraph 3, of the Convention to clarify the situation behind reports of illegal use of chemical agents.

Australia strongly supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We welcome the signing of a privileges and immunities agreement between Ukraine and the OPCW and value the Technical Secretariat and States Parties' support in responding to Ukraine's requests for assistance and protection under the CWC. Any possible CWC breaches should be investigated and identified in an OPCW report.

Australia remains deeply saddened by Alexei Navalny's death and holds the Russian Government solely responsible for his mistreatment and death. Russia must conduct an investigation and provide answers to the questions raised by 45 States Parties under Article IX of the CWC in October 2021 in relation to Mr Navalny's poisoning with a Novichok nerve agent.

Australia shares the grave concerns expressed by many States Parties about the catastrophic humanitarian crises caused by ongoing conflicts around the world. We support the Technical Secretariat's impartial role in monitoring the potential use of chemical weapons anywhere. Where there is credible evidence of possible CWC breaches, the Technical Secretariat should act as mandated by the CWC and assist States Parties as required.

In our capacity as permanent Chair of the Australia Group, we remain committed to the harmonisation of national export controls of sensitive and dual-use items to help participants implement the CWC. The Australia Group's work allows States Parties to apply appropriate export controls to reduce the risk of inadvertently contributing to chemical and biological weapons proliferation. We will continue to work together with other Australia Group participants, and the UNSC 1540 Committee, to strengthen the Convention and enable and sustain peaceful legitimate trade.

Australia supports efforts to promote diversity and inclusion at the OPCW while ensuring the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. We welcome the efforts by the OPCW and States Parties towards achieving gender equality, improving geographic representation, providing tenure flexibility and strengthening civil society engagement.

As we continue to work towards our shared goal of a world free of chemical weapons, Australia stands ready to assist the OPCW in its critical work.

I ask that this statement be made an official document of the 106th Session of the Executive Council, and for it to be published on the OPCW external server and the public website.

Thank you, Chairperson.