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OPENING STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL TO THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AT ITS 108TH SESSION

1. I welcome all delegations to the 108th Session of the Executive Council.
2. I thank the Chairperson of the Council, Ambassador Andrés Terán Parral, Permanent Representative of Ecuador, for his ongoing able stewardship.
3. We begin another year in an ever-evolving global security environment, marked by the geopolitical tensions and divisions well known by you all. This June, the world will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, banning the use of biological and chemical weapons in war. Despite the time elapsed and the efforts made by the international community, the global norm against the use of these abhorrent weapons continues to be tested. For many years, starting long before we all arrived here, the Secretariat has delivered on its mandates to the highest standards, and for the benefit of all States Parties. During the intersessional period, we made important progress in many fields.
4. I will start with the Syrian Arab Republic. Over the last 11 years, as a result of the painstaking efforts of the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), the previous Syrian authorities submitted 20 amendments to the Syrian initial declaration. Yet, the Secretariat was never able to confirm that the declaration submitted by the previous Syrian authorities was accurate and complete, because of the insufficient and inaccurate information it contained. To date, the DAT has raised and reported a total of 26 issues. Seven have been resolved, all of them thanks to the initiatives of the DAT. The other 19, some very serious, remain outstanding. In addition, the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria (FFM) and the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) have documented the use of chemical weapons, and in a number of incidents have identified the Syrian Arab Armed Forces as the perpetrators. In other words, and as has been reported over the years, it is undeniable that the previous Syrian authorities did not declare the full extent of the Syrian chemical weapons programme. Evidence shows that they continued to use, and possibly produce, chemical weapons after joining the Convention in 2013.
5. We are now facing a new political reality in Syria. On 8 December 2024, the former President fled his country, and a new government took over in the wake of a total collapse of all institutions. The Organisation has a new and historical opportunity to obtain clarifications on the full extent and scope of the Syrian chemical weapons programme. In all likelihood, the task we have ahead of us will be smaller in scale, but larger in complexity, than the one carried out 11 years ago, when the destruction of the Syrian Arab Republic's declared chemical weapons programme took place. So far, developments have been encouraging. The new authorities have expressed their desire to rid the country of all chemical weapons, and to normalise relations with the



Organisation. They also have agreed that the State of Qatar would represent the Syrian Arab Republic at the Organisation, until a new Syrian Permanent Representative to the OPCW is appointed (Note Verbale Ref. SQH.3.25.1, dated 7 January 2025). I hereby thank the Permanent Representation of Qatar to the OPCW, its Ambassador, and his team, for playing this important facilitation role.

6. Since 8 December 2024, the Secretariat has continued to closely monitor the situation in Syria. The full range of actions that we have already taken are detailed in the Note that was shared with all States Parties last Thursday, 27 February. These actions include:
 - (a) first contact with the new Syrian authorities, by note verbale dated 9 December 2024 (NV/ODG-636/24), one day after the fall of the Assad regime, requesting relevant information and updates on the chemical weapons programme;
 - (b) the Sixty-Sixth extraordinary Meeting of the Executive Council on 12 December 2024, convened at the initiative of the Director-General;
 - (c) my telephone conversation with Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani, new caretaker Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic (hereinafter referred to as “the Minister”) on 26 December 2024, aimed at securing the sites and at establishing technical contacts in order to facilitate future deployments of OPCW experts to Syria;
 - (d) my consultations with high-ranking officials of the United Nations; and
 - (e) two separate notes verbales from the Secretariat to the Permanent Representation of Qatar to the OPCW, acting on behalf of the Syrian Arab Republic, both dated 22 January 2025 (Notes Verbales No. NV/ODG-651/24 and NV/ODG-652/25).
7. The first note verbale, among other matters, recalled my proposal to deploy a Secretariat team to Syria, and contained the OPCW Secretariat’s new 9-point Action Plan for Syria. The second emphasised the importance of securing chemical weapons-related locations and materials, as well as the support and assistance we can provide in managing the risks posed by chemical weapons.
8. Against this backdrop, at the invitation of the Syrian Foreign Minister, last month I visited Damascus, for the first time during my tenure as Director-General, and was accompanied, inter alia, by the Deputy Director-General. It was also the first time for any Director-General of the OPCW to visit Syria. I met with Syria’s interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa (hereinafter referred to as “the President”), and with the Minister. I seize this opportunity to thank the Netherlands for having provided the security team and the armoured vehicles necessary for the deployment, as a relevant in-kind contribution. I also thank Lebanon for facilitating our transit through Beirut. During my meetings, both the President and the Minister expressed a strong commitment to cooperate with the OPCW to address all outstanding issues relating to Syria’s chemical weapons dossier. The President stated his country’s determination to fulfil all of its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, including the provision of a new declaration containing all aspects of Syria’s chemical weapons programme. The President and the Minister gave us assurances to designate a point of

contact and create a National Authority, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which would include relevant experts in charge of cooperating with the Secretariat to ensure all requirements and obligations are being met. The National Authority would also facilitate capacity-building assistance in cooperation with the Secretariat, for the implementation of the Convention; provide unfettered access and full support for the ongoing investigations conducted by the FFM and the IIT; facilitate the establishment of an OPCW presence in Syria, for as long as necessary; and cooperate in the implementation of the aforementioned “9-point Action Plan for Syria”. Additionally, at the end of the meeting, the Minister informed us of his intention to travel to The Hague to brief the Executive Council, as he will do tomorrow at 15:00. A member of the IIT joined my visit to Damascus as part of the delegation of the Secretariat. It was the first time that the IIT was granted access to the Syrian Arab Republic since the team was established in 2018.

9. All this marks a significant break with the past. Accordingly, the outcome of my visit was positive, and constitutes an important step towards bringing Syria’s chemical weapons dossier to a close. With this visit, we started to lay the foundation for cooperation with the new Syrian authorities based on trust and transparency. We have also established a principle of mutual understanding of, and commitment to, the fulfilment of the Syrian Arab Republic’s obligations, particularly under paragraph 7 of Article VII of the Convention. It is now time to start translating that understanding and commitment into action. On 21 February, I received, through the Embassy of Qatar, a letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic, informing me that he had appointed “the Ministry’s focal point for chemical weapons matters”. Last Thursday, I had the first personal contact in The Hague with the Focal Point, and he also had a series of meetings with technical experts of the Secretariat, with the purpose of preparing a visit of a Secretariat team to Damascus. Such a visit of technical experts to Damascus is planned to take place very soon, in a few days, after this session. The purpose will be to work on establishing an OPCW permanent physical presence in Syria, and to start jointly planning the deployments to chemical weapons sites.
10. As soon as Syria’s authorities are ready, the Secretariat will deploy a mission of experts to assist Syria in drawing up an inventory of chemical weapons sites, warfare agents and precursors, equipment, munitions, and other components of the programme. Identifying, securing, declaring, and potentially destroying these elements is our first priority. Securing all supporting records and other documentation, as well as witnesses and evidence related to the chemical weapons programme is also a priority. Once the inventory has been completed, the Syrian Arab Republic can provide the Secretariat with a new, complete declaration as required. For security and efficiency reasons, the Council may wish to consider starting the destruction of the various chemical weapons components as soon as technically feasible, without waiting until the end of the visit to about 100 sites, as the completion of all those visits will require a certain period of time. For this purpose, an agreed detailed destruction plan between Syria and the Secretariat will be prepared and submitted to the Council, for its consideration and, should it deem it appropriate, approval. At the same time, the Secretariat will engage with Syria on measures to prevent the re-emergence and proliferation of chemical weapons, as well as contribute to investigations that should bring all individuals responsible for the use of chemical weapons to justice. The DAT will assist Syria in completing the inventory and preparing its new declaration. The FFM and the IIT will continue their work until their mandates have been fulfilled.

11. As was the case in 2013, the above-mentioned tasks will require significant additional resources, particularly for the current budget year. The Secretariat must be ready to conduct the necessary deployments to the Syrian Arab Republic, and to sustain an ongoing presence in Damascus for some time. All the work in Syria will be conducted in an uncertain security environment. Certain conditions will need to be met before the teams of the Secretariat can deploy to the different sites. We will need contacts with specific knowledge on the ground, adequate security arrangements, and appropriate logistical support, adapted to the nature of the sites visited. Just this past weekend, half a dozen incidents involving fatalities were recorded in Damascus.
12. Turning to Ukraine, tragically, the war has now entered its fourth year. The ongoing allegations of use of chemical weapons are contained in the compendium of correspondence received from the Russian Federation and Ukraine. It shows that the threat of use has not diminished. During the intersessional period, the Secretariat was requested, under subparagraph 38(e) of Article VIII of the Convention, to conduct a technical assistance visit (TAV) to Ukraine, through two separate requests. The first request was made in relation to an incident that reportedly took place on 20 September 2024, along the confrontation lines between opposing forces near the village of Illinka, in the Dnipropetrovsk region. On 18 November 2024, the report of the TAV was delivered to the Government of Ukraine and, upon its request, immediately circulated by the Secretariat to all States Parties (Note S/2338/2024, dated 18 November 2024). As reported, the TAV confirmed, through use of the latest existing technological tools, that the chain of custody of the samples collected by Ukrainian investigators had been maintained. Two OPCW designated laboratories selected by me, separately and independently from one another, confirmed the presence of a riot control agent, 2-Chlorobenzalmalononitrile—known as CS—in the grenade and soil samples provided by Ukraine. The second request refers to three separate alleged incidents of use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in the Dnipropetrovsk region on 2 October 2024 near the village of Mariivka, and on 12 and 14 October 2024, near the village of Illinka. On 14 February 2024, the report of the second TAV was delivered to the Government of Ukraine and, upon its request, once again immediately circulated by the Secretariat to all States Parties (S/2370/2025, dated 14 February 2025). As in the first report, the TAV team, which conducted two deployments, confirmed that the chain of custody of the samples collected by Ukrainian investigators had been maintained. The results of the analyses of the samples conducted by two OPCW designated laboratories selected by me, separately and independently from one another, indicated once again the presence of the same riot control agent, CS, in the grenade and soil samples provided by Ukraine. Under the Convention, the use of riot control agents as a method of warfare is prohibited. These reports show that the threat of use of chemical weapons in that conflict is real, and these results must be taken seriously. The Secretariat stands ready to provide assistance and protection to any State Party, upon request, in case of use, or threat of use, of chemical weapons, to the extent that available resources allow.
13. Alongside the technical assistance visits, the Secretariat continued to deliver support to Ukraine, upon its request, in the area of assistance and protection under Article X of the Convention. During the intersessional period, we concluded the online specialised course on emergency response to incidents involving toxic chemicals for Ukrainian first responders. The course was conducted from 12 August to 20 December 2024. Its main objective was to provide participants with the basic knowledge needed to respond to chemical incidents, and to prepare them for practical training on the use of chemical

reconnaissance detectors, as well as basic techniques for sampling and preserving evidence in a hot zone. A total of 56 participants attended this online course. Later, from 24 to 28 February 2025, the Secretariat organised a fourth in-person specialised course on sampling for investigations of chemical weapons use, for Ukrainian experts at the OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology (ChemTech Centre). It was an iteration of the three courses already conducted for 60 participants in June and September last year, and it focused on the handling of toxic chemicals, documentation, and sampling in case of incidents, to ensure that those investigating allegations of use of toxic chemicals as weapons follow the highest international standards. The course was attended in person by 20 new participants. The relevance and value of all the training activities are evident in the context of the technical assistant visits that I mentioned earlier, for which the samples identified, collected, packed, and transported met the highest international standards as followed by the Ukrainian experts, once they have been trained by the Secretariat. In addition, seven of the so-called First Defender Detectors will soon be received and delivered to Ukraine at a total cost of EUR 575,000. As was the case in several instances in 2024, with 73 pieces of equipment already delivered, this new equipment will be handed over to Ukraine and accompanied by the necessary training on its use. Of the EUR 6.1 million in the Trust Fund on Assistance and Protection for Ukraine under Article X, an amount of EUR 2.7 million has already been spent. The Secretariat's expanding activities means that more funding is needed. I invite all States Parties to consider contributing to this effort.

14. Last week, on 25 February, I received the Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the State of Palestine to the OPCW. We discussed the possible provision of expert advice and training for developing and strengthening Palestine's capacity in responding to incidents involving toxic chemicals falling under the Convention. The Secretariat stands ready to assist a possible request from the State of Palestine.
15. Another priority on which we continue to make progress is our response to artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies. On 29 January 2025, the Secretariat circulated a Note to all States Parties (S/2360/2025), on the "Global Conference on the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Advancing the Implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention: A Path Forward". The outcome of the Global Conference, which was held in Rabat, Morocco, from 22 to 24 October 2024, was remarkable. It reaffirmed that while AI may present challenges to the object and purpose of the Convention, it may also greatly assist the Secretariat in implementing its mandates.
16. Currently, the Secretariat is taking action on setting up a new Scientific Advisory Board Temporary Working Group on AI, which commenced its work in January of this year; overseeing the work by the teams which were selected to participate in the Secretariat's research programme—the so-called AI Research Challenge—launched last June; and testing and evaluating AI-based solutions to increase the efficiency of existing workplace practices and processes. We are considering organising another conference focused on AI. Such a conference will further explore several specific aspects of AI's ramifications of interest to us. The actions we are taking right now are essential to ensuring that the OPCW is not caught unprepared, as AI continues to transform industries, governance, and security. You will have an opportunity to discuss AI and its impact on our work under the Council's dedicated agenda item on emerging technologies.

17. Addressing the priorities I have outlined so far requires that adequate resources be provided in a timely and predictable manner. The Secretariat is currently developing its 2026–2027 Biennium Programme and Budget, which will be shared at the beginning of July with the States Parties for their review. In this context, I must underline that resolving the long-standing Syrian chemical weapons dossier is a major undertaking that goes to the heart of the Convention, and it directly contributes to global peace and security. It presents extraordinary additional and time-sensitive resource requirements that are reflected in the Secretariat Note circulated to all States Parties last Thursday (S/2376/2025, dated 26 February 2025). The proposal is that these requirements will be met through a combination of extrabudgetary and regular budgetary funding, this year as well as in the 2026–2027 biennium. The Secretariat will also need to dedicate additional resources for new expertise and tools related to AI. I also expect this to be reflected in the 2026–2027 Biennium Programme and Budget proposal to be considered by the Council and Conference later this year.
18. Delivering on a full agenda requires that we make the best use of available talent and expertise, while preserving the non-career nature of the Organisation. If we have good people we can deliver. If we have good expertise we can deliver. In reference to limited exceptions to the OPCW tenure policy, I wish to highlight the Director-General's inability to rehire some former staff members, aside from the narrowly defined authority to rehire inspectors. This constitutes a final remaining gap that needs to be addressed in order to facilitate the completion of the teams that are indispensable to fulfilling the tasks mandated by the policy-making organs. A draft decision on this defining issue is before this session of the Council. I sincerely thank Mexico and New Zealand for the time they have devoted to this important question and for the efforts made in engaging with States Parties' experts on the benefits and need for this limited, but vital, improvement in the governance of the Secretariat. This would be the last in a series of steps taken since 2018 to ensure the modernisation of the Secretariat and its capacity to attract, train, and retain the best experts.
19. The OPCW's admission into the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund (UNJSPF), with effect from 1 January 2025, has been a great success. The idea for the OPCW to become part of the UNJSPF has a long history in this Organisation. But considering the clear benefits it entails, at the end of 2023 we decided to initiate the process that would end in a proposal submitted to the States Parties. The establishment of the contacts with the United Nations in order to submit to the Conference the draft decision containing the proposal took us over a year. The Conference at its last session authorised the Director-General to sign the agreement between the UNJSPF and the OPCW, subject to a decision of the United Nations General Assembly to admit the Organisation to membership of the fund. The General Assembly gave its authorisation on 24 December 2024. The Secretariat is already witnessing the positive impact of this development. We are receiving a notable increase in applications for job vacancies. I seize this opportunity to thank all of you, States Parties, for your support of this important initiative. I also wish to thank the Director of Administration and his team, because without their dedication, expertise, and interest we would today not be in the United Nations system pension fund.

20. I will now refer to the upgrade of the physical security infrastructure of this building, in response to the intrusion it suffered on 3 December 2021. You will recall that a comprehensive plan was designed to upgrade the physical security infrastructure of the building. Various improvements are already in place and have been financed from the regular budget. In particular, you will have noticed that the security upgrade of the entrance lobby has recently been successfully completed, with new secure entrance turnstiles, doors, and floor-to-ceiling security glass panels. The remaining physical security requirements, ensuring full compliance with the United Nations minimum security standards, require a further EUR 6 million of investment. These requirements include upgrading the Front Guard House and main gates as well as upgrading the perimeter fence and intrusion detection capability. At the last session of the Conference, States Parties approved the reallocation of EUR 3 million from the 2022 cash surplus to finance the upgrades of the Front Guard House and the main gates, as proposed in the Revised Programme and Budget of the OPCW for 2025. The Secretariat has requested EUR 3 million from the Host Country to fund the replacement of the perimeter fence and improvement of the intrusion detection capability. A contribution of EUR 1 million has been pledged, and I very much thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.
21. Also related to the Host Country, I informed the Council, at its last session, of the 2025 NATO Summit, which will take place at the World Forum next door, on 24 and 25 June 2025. Further to the note verbale issued by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 30 September and circulated to all States Parties, the Secretariat is in consultations with the Dutch Government to ensure that our activities can continue with limited disruption.
22. Along with the non-routine activities and new tasks, we have been continuing the verification of destruction of non-stockpiled chemical weapons.
23. The Secretariat continued to verify the disposal of chemical weapons component wastes and rocket motors, at the non-contiguous sites of the Blue Grass Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant in Kentucky, and the Anniston Static Detonation Chamber in Alabama, the United States of America. Two quarterly visits were conducted to Blue Grass.
24. China and Japan have continued bilateral consultations on the excavation, recovery, and destruction of chemical weapons abandoned by Japan on the territory of China. As of 31 January 2025, a total of 118,620 of the 153,665 declared items of abandoned chemical weapons (ACW) had been reported by Japan as destroyed. This has been verified by the Secretariat. The Secretariat conducted four ACW inspections in China during the intersessional period, which included two inspections at storage and destruction facilities in Haerbaling, one inspection at the mobile destruction facility in Wuhan, and one inspection at the Hunchun storage facility. I consider this matter of utmost importance and commend the efforts made by China and Japan with the support of the Secretariat. In addition, two inspections of items declared as ACW were conducted in Germany in February 2025.
25. Concerning old chemical weapons (OCW), during the intersessional period we conducted inspections in France, Belgium, and Switzerland.

26. During the intersessional period we delivered a total of 36 capacity-building events benefiting 1,030 participants from all geographical regions, as part of our international cooperation programmes, and assistance and protection activities. Five of these events were hosted at the facilities of the ChemTech Centre. These activities involved the launch of two brand new initiatives, namely, a training cycle on investigation of chemical incidents for law enforcement agencies and a course on maintenance of laboratory equipment, both for Member States in the Africa region.
27. Other activities included the ongoing expansion of institutional support to laboratories especially in the Africa and Latin America and Caribbean regions; a workshop on best practices in resolving transfer discrepancies for Member States from the Western European and Others Group; and a course on detection and sampling of chemical warfare agents in highly contaminated environments for Asian States Parties. Furthermore, last October, we launched new Indicative Guidelines on Safe and Secure Transportation of Hazardous Chemicals by Road, available in all official languages on the OPCW public website. I seize this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to the new Director of the International Cooperation and Assistance Division, Suljuk Mustansar Tarar, who is familiar to many of you.
28. Regarding our industry verification regime, the Secretariat, in cooperation with States Parties, met the planned target for 2024. Under the Programme and Budget of the OPCW for 2024–2025, the number of Article VI inspections approved for 2025 is 200. That is, 200 chemical industry inspections in 44 States Parties completed, comprising 11 Schedule 1 facilities, 42 Schedule 2 facilities, 10 Schedule 3 facilities, and 137 other chemical production facility (OCPF) plant sites. The Secretariat continues to work with inspected States Parties to carry out the inspections planned for 2025. Since January 2025, two Schedule 1, five Schedule 2, four Schedule 3, and 13 OCPF plant site inspections have taken place, under the Inspection Plan for 2025. These deployments have involved 12 States Parties. Since the last session of the Council, the Secretariat has completed one sampling and analysis inspection under the OCPF regime, with six others planned for 2025—four under the Schedule 2 regime and two under the OCPF regime. The timely restructuring of the Inspectorate Division, on which I briefed this Council at its last session, continues to enhance preparedness for contingency operations. At the same time, it is maintaining our capacity for preventing re-emergence through industry verification and related activities.
29. Maintaining high operational performance, with changing priorities, requires close monitoring of developments in science and technology. But it also means that we must maximise the use of existing capabilities and knowledge across the Secretariat. In this vein, last December our inspectors benefited from a workshop on preparedness for non-routine missions, namely, challenge inspections and investigations of alleged use, provided by the FFM and DAT colleagues at the ChemTech Centre. This demonstrates once again the value of the ChemTech Centre as a platform for supporting the Secretariat's cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer in the post-destruction phase. Additionally, in line with our focus on building and enhancing the skills of our inspectors, the Inspectorate Division provided, coordinated, or participated in six training courses for a combined 433 training days. These trainings, attended by a total of 70 participants, were conducted at the OPCW Main Building, the ChemTech Centre, and at external facilities.

30. Each year, the OPCW carries out proficiency tests for institutions that may wish to become part of the OPCW network of designated analytical laboratories. In 2024, two OPCW Proficiency Tests for Environmental Analysis were completed. Following the completion of the Fifty-Fifth Official OPCW Proficiency Test, 30 laboratories from 25 States Parties were designated for analysis of authentic environmental samples. This is an increase of four designated laboratories in comparison to 2023. Additionally, the Ninth Biomedical Proficiency Test was conducted, following which a total of 18 laboratories from 14 States Parties were designated for the analysis of authentic biomedical samples.
31. Before closing, I wish to draw the Council's attention to two other matters that are in the hands of the States Parties.
32. First, a draft decision on a road map for the process of appointing the next Director-General is before the Council (EC-108/DEC/CRP.1, dated 7 February 2025). This is accompanied by the Chairperson's Note on the Road Map (EC-108/2, also dated 7 February 2025), which outlines the procedure, including all relevant timelines. The procedure is based on the one followed by the Council in both 2009 and in 2017. This process is exclusively in the hands of the States Parties, through the Executive Council and its Chairperson.
33. Next, you will recall that at its last session, the Conference requested the General Committee to establish "an appropriate inclusive format" for conducting discussions on the current implementation of the rules governing elections of members of the Council. The Office of the Legal Adviser was requested by several States Parties to provide an advisory legal opinion addressing the prevailing interpretation of Rule 85 of the Rules of Procedure of the Conference. The advisory opinion was shared with States Parties on 12 February 2025.
34. The tasks I have outlined relating to the Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, and AI, as well as other ongoing mandates, cannot be achieved without the full and active participation of all States Parties. It is also up to you to equip the Secretariat with the necessary resources, financial and human, to carry out the responsibilities entrusted to us under the Convention, by this Council, and by the Conference. I am confident that the Secretariat can continue to rely on your guidance and support in 2025 and beyond. Excellencies, distinguished delegates, I wish you fruitful deliberations.