

Speech by Mayor Jozias van Aartsen on the occasion of the commemoration of the victims of chemical weapons, 26 April 2012

Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

*“Seventeen days of Hades!”*

was how John McCrae, army field surgeon and poet described his tour of duty on the front at the Second Battle of Ypres. On Thursday 22 April 1915 he witnessed first-hand the start of modern chemical warfare.

McCrae wrote:

*“At the end of the first day if anyone had told us we had to spend seventeen days there, we would have folded our hands and said it could not be done.”*

John McCrae and his medical staff treated thousands of victims of the chlorine gas attacks in their field hospital. In the end, during the further course of the 'War to end all wars' (as it was dubbed) an estimated one million soldiers were exposed to these chemical warfare agents. And more than a hundred thousand of them died.

In the light of all the misery caused by these chemical weapons during the First World War, it is especially bitter to note that a ban on such weapons had already been seriously considered 16 years earlier. As early as 1899, during the First Peace Conference, a motion was adopted which included a ban on the use of projectiles which were ‘intended to spread asphyxiating or deleterious gases’.

You will be familiar with the history of the attempts to reach a ban on chemical weapons, as well as the sad stories about their use in the decades following the First World War.

Every time humanity was reminded of how perfidious these weapons are. And every time the willingness to actually do something to end the production and distribution of such weapons has grown in order to free the world of this scourge.

It was the horrifying pictures of the gas attacks on Kurdish civilians in Halabja in 1988 which proved to be the turning point for a final ban on chemical weapons. This month it is 15 years ago that the OPCW opened its doors here on the Johan de Wittlaan. And whose job it is to do a magnificent but arduous task. The threat of chemical weapons is by no means behind us. Everywhere lethal poison gas is still stockpiled. That is why it is a good thing that the Chemical Weapons Convention exists and that it has been signed and ratified by the great majority of countries. It is because of the men and women at the OPCW that since 1997 the world has become a safer place. Something we can all be grateful for.

The municipality of The Hague wholeheartedly supports the ultimate aim of the Paris Convention and that of the OPCW: a world without chemical weapons. That is why we do everything we can to serve your organisation and staff. You know you can always count on us.

At the same time the world is counting on you. The threat posed by chemical weapons is as present as ever. We therefore have to do everything in our power to hold this threat in check. This is a duty not only to ourselves but to the future generations who will also inhabit this planet. We have a duty to them as well as to all the victims of chemical weapons since those wretched days in Ypres in April 1915.

Further to his experience of hell on earth, John McCrae went on to write his world-famous poem which, to this day, never ceases to move us:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

Thank you.