



National Statement by Australia

H.E. Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus, Permanent Representative of Australia to the OPCW

At the Ninety-Ninth Session of the Executive Council, 8-11 March 2022

Madam Chair,

I would like to start by acknowledging that this will be Australia's last Executive Council as a member for the next few years. It has been an honour for Australia, and for me personally, to have served on the Council, including as Vice-Chair. I know that Canadian Ambassador Helfand and her team will continue to support the OPCW as strongly as Australia has and will continue to represent our shared CANZ interests.

Australia condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's unprovoked and unjustified attack on its neighbour. The invasion is a gross violation of international law and the UN Charter. We support the call by UN Secretary General Guterres to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine. Australia stands in staunch support of Ukraine and its people.

Madam Chair, as I reflect on Australia's two years on the Executive Council, I am proud of what we have achieved. In troubled and uncertain times, it is more essential than ever for members states to keep working to strengthen the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and achieve its original aim to eliminate an entire category of weapons of mass destruction. Holding Syria to account for its use of chemical weapons is an important outcome. We have stood firm, and we have implemented the object and purpose of the Convention as intended by its drafters.

I am proud to have led, together with Switzerland and the United States, work on the aerosolised use of central nervous system-acting chemicals, culminating in the adoption of a decision at the Conference of States Parties in December. I would like to thank the co-sponsors for their support over many years. The decision is an important example of how the Chemical Weapons Convention can help safeguard against future chemical weapons threats and the successes possible when nations work together. However, we must recognise, Madam Chair, there is still work to be done before we truly rid the world of chemical weapons.

I welcome the release of two OPCW Fact Finding Mission (FFM) reports in recent weeks. I would like to commend the FFM for its continued work, notwithstanding the operational challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of support from the Syrian Arab Republic.

The chemical weapons use in Marea in 2015 and Kafr Zeita in Syria in 2016 is disappointing. Those who used and authorised the use of chemical weapons described in the FFM reports must be identified and held to account. Australia supports the ongoing crucial work of the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT). We hope that the latest FFM reports will form part of the IIT's work, and that this brings about accountability for the use, by any and all parties, of chemical weapons in Syria.

Australia notes with continued frustration the lack of cooperation by the Syrian Arab Republic in this work. There is no excuse for Syria's continued refusal to grant entry for all members of the OPCW Declarations Assessment Team (DAT). Or for the latest round of consultations to have been delayed by almost a year. Syria must cooperate fully with the OPCW and come into compliance with the Convention.

Madam Chair, the obligation to prevent chemical weapons attacks applies to all States Parties, no matter how large or small. Australia remains deeply concerned that the Russian Federation has not answered the questions that remain around the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. As we have said repeatedly, the poisoning cannot be left unexplained. Serious questions remain regarding how Mr Navalny came to be exposed to a dangerous nerve agent. Under CWC obligations, we once again call on Russia to provide full details.

Madam Chair, Australia places a great importance on fulfilling its obligations under the Convention. Last month (February) Australia hosted its first ever series of four sequential inspections. There was a range of logistical issues for both the Technical Secretariat and the National Authority to work through due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, the four inspections occurred successfully. We call on all States Parties to work with the Technical Secretariat on creative and flexible solutions to allow for industry inspections to continue unabated during the ongoing pandemic.

Like many countries, Australia faces a number of legacy chemical weapons issues. During World War II, a range of chemical agents were imported into Australia for defensive purposes. The munitions and agents were disposed of in accordance with the practices of the time. This included destruction, burial and disposal at sea. Australia's Department of Defence identified 139 sites where such activities potentially took place. The Wartime Remnants Clean-up Program was established to further investigate and where necessary, undertake hazard reduction of these sites. The program has commenced prioritised Hazard Assessments and is currently undertaking the remediation of an identified destruction site. The establishment of a Virtual Facility Arrangement will provide a suitable mechanism to support the program in the management of SOCW, and Australia's full co-operation with the OPCW on this important work is assured.

Australia is continuing to support CWC implementation in the Indo-Pacific region. We look forward to welcoming a delegation from Malaysia later this month as part of the OPCW Partnership program. Our two National Authorities will collaborate on issues including CWC implementation legislation, chemical safety and security and regulating the import and export of Scheduled chemicals.

It's vital that the OPCW continues to strengthen its analytical and technical capacity. Australia was pleased to have one of our laboratories achieve OPCW Designated Laboratory status late last year and join the global network of facilities with biomedical and environmental sampling capability.

I praise all member states that have contributed to the construction and operation of the Centre for Chemistry and Technology (CCT). This state-of-the-art facility is a key component of our ability to meet 21st century challenges. This is why I'm very proud to announce that Australia will donate an additional AUD150,000 to the CCT.

Madam Chair, I would like to thank delegations for their continued support for the Organisational Governance facilitation. I continue to be heartened by the active high-level participation of delegations as we seek to give the organisational more flexibility while staying true to its non-tenure nature. This constructive engagement should be encouraged in the lead up to the Fifth Review Conference and action taken before the end of this year as we seek to place the OPCW in the best possible position to deal with the challenges of the future.

Madam Chair, Australia departs the Council confident that progress has been made over the past two years, demonstrating that the Convention is working. The Organisation's work will not end with the final destruction of declared stockpiles in 2023. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Chemical Weapons Convention this April, the OPCW will continue to play a crucial role in preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons and this terrible threat to humanity.

Thank you Madam Chair.