

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR JOSEPH MANSO PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO THE OPCW AT THE ONE HUNDRED AND FIRST SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Mr. Chairperson,
Mr. Director-General,
Distinguished Ambassadors and Delegates,

I would like to start by expressing my sincere appreciation for the growing number of delegates joining, or rejoining, our ranks during OPCW meetings. They may not all yet be able to be physically present, but their virtual participation sends a clear message of their personal and national commitment to the mission of the OPCW to rid the world of chemical weapons. It is also a testament to the enduring relevance of the Organization to achieve this worthy goal.

Like all multilateral institutions, the strength of this Organization lies in the active participation of its members, and we welcome it. The pandemic forced us all to embrace technology as a new tool to enable multilateral diplomacy and the efforts of the Technical Secretariat in that regard have been nothing short of remarkable. As we move back to conducting more business in-person, the United States sincerely hopes that live-streaming and recordings of the proceedings of Council sessions as well as Conferences of the States Parties will be maintained. It is not only delegates that help us make informed decisions that shape the direction of this Organization, but also the technical and National Authority experts in our respective capitals. The ability of States Parties' experts to stay abreast of OPCW proceedings should not be limited by the size of their travel budget or geographical distance from The Hague.

Mr. Chairperson, the United States is happy to share that thanks to the availability of vaccines, the improved public health situation, and the associated lifting of travel restrictions, we have been able to host ten Article VI industry inspections so far in 2022. The United States expects to be able to accommodate a full schedule of inspections during 2023. We urge all States Parties that have not done so already to take all necessary measures to allow the OPCW to fully carry out its verification mandate.

The United States also continues to make steady, measurable progress towards the complete destruction of its declared chemical weapons stockpile. We remain on track to meet our planned completion date. Over 98.27 percent of our declared stockpile has now been verifiably destroyed under the watchful eyes of OPCW inspectors. Though nearing completion, the United States continues to review further opportunities to optimize performance at destruction facilities and move as quickly as possible towards the completion of our chemical weapons destruction effort without jeopardizing safety and environmental considerations, and we continue to consult our local communities in this pursuit. The draft decision under agenda subitem 6(e), Destruction-related plans and facility agreements, will help us meet those goals. We look forward to its adoption by the Council.

The United States would also like to commend the Estonian Chair of the Open-Ended Working Group for the Preparation of the Fifth Review Conference for the successful discussions on verification-related issues and enhancing International Cooperation and Assistance. States Parties discussed many useful ideas for improving the verification regime and for using International Cooperation and Assistance programs to build capacity and promote full implementation of the Convention. We believe that it is crucial that the Review Conference address forward-looking ideas in these areas to ensure that the OPCW remains fit for purpose. We also commend the South African Chair of the Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism for his efforts to address the emerging threat of CW use by non-state actors, and we hope the Review Conference will highlight this topic. Finally, the Organization cannot be considered fit for purpose without remaining committed to geographic and gender diversity.

The United States would also like to bring to this Council's attention the Director-General's note on the draft revised Programme and Budget of the OPCW for 2023. We believe it responsibly reallocates funds to extinguish the 2019 cash deficit, replenishes essential special funds – for OPCW equipment, the lab, security, and infrastructure – and offsets expenditures affected by unexpected inflation. This technical update will allow the OPCW to continue all approved programmatic activities, including its critical work investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria, capacity-building to prevent and respond to chemical terrorist incidents, strengthening laboratory capacity to identify chemical weapons, and improvements to the OPCW's cybersecurity capabilities. Importantly, the proposal will maintain the funding allocated to International Cooperation and Assistance in 2023 – initiatives to which the United States remains deeply committed, as demonstrated through our voluntary contributions to the Africa Program. The United States, therefore, urges this Council to support the revised 2023 Programme and Budget. It provides an adequate response to the Organization's current inflation predicament caused in no small part by the global food and energy market disruption brought about by Russia's war in Ukraine.

Mr. Chairperson, this brings me to the subject of Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. The United States finds it particularly unfortunate that, as the OPCW and the world slowly recover from the COVID global health crisis, this session of the Council will remain overshadowed by Russia's war of aggression, which has led to repercussions globally. The United States reaffirms its steadfast support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and expresses its solidarity with both the Ukrainian government and the people of Ukraine. We commend the Technical Secretariat and States Parties for responding to Ukraine's requests for assistance and protection, as provided for under the Convention.

Despite what our colleagues from the Russian delegation would like us to believe, their country's unprovoked war against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a State Party to the Convention is relevant to this Council, the Organization, and the Convention. This is so, not because of the growing human toll or the senseless destruction caused by Russian shelling. It is so because Russia, itself, made it so. As this Council is aware, on numerous occasions, our distinguished colleagues from the Russian delegation have asked the Technical Secretariat to circulate documents with unsubstantiated allegations of past or planned chemical plots by Ukraine. The Russian delegation has circulated no less than four notes with baseless allegations

since our last Council session in July. It is, however, Russia's own widespread attacks on civilian infrastructure that have heightened the risk of dangerous chemical releases.

Russia's attempts to instrumentalize international fora, including this Organization, to push out disinformation to justify its war of choice is tasteless but, unfortunately, unsurprising. It is just another page of the Kremlin's disinformation playbook that we have seen Moscow deploy at the OPCW and other organizations time and time again. They did so when Russian agents used Novichok chemical agents to poison the Skripals in 2018 and again in 2020 against Mr. Navalny. Russia has spread similarly baseless accusations repeatedly at the UN Security Council and, most recently – with little success, if I may add – during the formal consultative meeting under Article V of the Biological Weapons Convention in Geneva. It is, however, to protect the Assad regime from accountability for its repeated use of chemical weapons that Russia has probably used disinformation most extensively.

On that issue, Mr. Chairperson – and again most unfortunately – little progress has been made with regard to Syria's chemical weapons program and the United States deplors the Assad regime's chosen path of obstruction and excuse-making. Nine years after it joined the Convention, 108 monthly DG reports on the issue, and 24 rounds of consultations with the Declaration Assessment Team later, Syria's declaration still cannot be considered complete or accurate. Syria must fully declare and destroy its chemical weapons program and allow access, for personnel designated by the OPCW, to its country to verify it has fully declared and destroyed its chemical weapons program.

We also want to take the opportunity to reiterate our full confidence in the independence and professionalism of the Fact-Finding Mission and Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), who have continued their work tirelessly despite the pandemic and the obstructionist behavior of the Syrian regime.

Let us not forget, the Assad regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons as confirmed and reported by independent investigations. The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism confirmed the regime was responsible for three chlorine attacks in 2014 and 2015, as well as the sarin attack on Khan Shaykhun on April 4, 2017. The IIT has separately concluded the regime was responsible for three chemical weapons attacks in March 2017 – two involving sarin and one involving chlorine – as well as a chlorine attack in Saraqib in February 2018. The Assad regime's appalling behavior and its breach of its Chemical Weapons Convention obligations is undeniable.

The United States condemns in the strongest terms the repeated use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime and remains steadfast in its demands that the Assad regime immediately comply with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

We also call on the Russian Federation to stop shielding Syria from accountability for its use of chemical weapons. No amount of disinformation from the Kremlin can hide its hand in abetting the Assad regime.

The United States commends the independent, unbiased, and expert work of the OPCW staff and condemns the use of chemical weapons anywhere, by anyone, under any circumstances. We also reaffirm our commitment to hold accountable the perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria and beyond. We are looking forward to the release of the IIT reports on the April 7, 2018, and September 1, 2015, attacks in Douma and Marea, respectively.

I ask that this statement be designated an official document of this Council session and posted on both Catalyst and the public website.