

**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 SECOND SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE
COUNCIL**

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

The threat of continued use of chemicals as weapons is real and, unfortunately, it continues to grow. Now is the time for States Parties to take efforts to bolster the capabilities of this Organization. Doing so is necessary to deter chemical weapons use and dissuade States from further developing chemical weapons programs. While we continue to build an organization fit for this purpose, we must also send a clear political signal to all those considering the use of chemical weapons that they will be held accountable. As recently as January 27, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, along with his counterparts from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, reaffirmed our determination to hold accountable the perpetrators of all chemical weapons attacks in Syria and beyond. The CWC has been a successful tool supporting global security. We must continue our effort to fight against impunity for the use of chemical weapons.

As such, Mr. Chairperson, the United States is looking forward to the upcoming Review Conference. It is a good opportunity to work together to chart a path for the future of the Organization and reflect on the work still ahead of us. It is also a moment to celebrate the achievements of the Organization over the last five years, of which there have been many. The United States strongly supports the work of the OPCW and believes the Review Conference should recognize the achievements and decisions made over these past five years, including efforts to hold to account those that use CW, while providing strategic guidance for the future.

It is important, first, to reflect on the legacy of atrocities in Syria, in particular the Assad regime's repeated use of chemical weapons, and the historic efforts that States Parties have taken to respond to this tragedy and work to eliminate the threat of Syria's chemical weapons program. States Parties have overwhelmingly supported the work of the OPCW to investigate and establish the facts surrounding these chemical weapons attacks, including taking a decision at a special session of the Conference of the States Parties in June 2018 that led to the establishment of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT). States Parties have consistently reinforced their support for the IIT, including by approving the budget to fund its critical mission. The IIT has produced outstanding, highly detailed, and professional reports. Not unexpectedly, they have identified the Syrian regime as responsible for CW use in Syria in five separate attacks, including in its third report released on January 27, which concluded that the Syrian regime was responsible for the April 2018 CW attack in Douma.

Specifically, the IIT found that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the Syrian Arab Air Forces dropped two yellow cylinders containing toxic chlorine gas on the Damascus suburb of Douma on April 7, 2018. These weapons hit two residential buildings in a central area of the city, releasing the toxic chemical and killing 43 named individuals and affecting countless more.

The report also puts to rest Russia and Syria's baseless allegations that opposition forces were to blame for the Douma attack. The IIT made clear through its vast body of evidence rigorously tested against several scenarios that Russian and Syrian allegations lacked any shred of credibility. In fact, the IIT's findings note the role of Russian forces in Douma at the time of the attack. The report notes that Russian forces were co-located at the base from which Assad's helicopters launched their deadly chemical attack, and that Russian forces controlled the airspace over Douma along with the Syrian air force. The Assad regime took advantage of Russia's protection to use chemical weapons to advance its assault on Douma. We continue to have serious CWC compliance questions that remain unanswered regarding Russia's assistance to the Assad regime in regard to the regime's use of chemical weapons in Douma.

Syria's noncompliance with its CWC obligations is clear, as repeatedly illustrated in the IIT's reports. In response to the first IIT report, States Parties took measures to uphold the provisions of the Convention, and when the Syrian regime failed to act, they overwhelmingly decided in April 2021 to suspend some of Syria's rights and privileges under the Convention. We must continue to support the important work of identifying the perpetrators of CW use in Syria to protect the global norm against chemical weapons use and maintain the core pillars of this Convention.

Mr. Chairperson, it is also important to recall the one-year anniversary of the unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Like in Syria, there has been untold human suffering at the hands of the Russian Federation. Over the last year, Russia has killed tens of thousands of Ukrainian men, women, and children, destroyed more than half of the country's energy grid, and bombed more than 700 hospitals and 2600 schools. Over the last year, Russia has made outlandish accusations that Ukraine was going to use chemical or biological weapons, including as a pretext for its war of aggression against Ukraine.

It is, in fact, the Russian Federation that is in non-compliance with the Convention. Russia has used chemical weapons at least twice in recent years in assassination attempts, which illustrates that it retains an undeclared chemical weapons program. At the October 2021 Executive Council session, forty-five States Parties, including the United States, called upon the Russian Federation to answer questions under Article IX of the Convention regarding the poisoning of Mr. Navalny. So far, the Russian Federation has not provided an adequate response to these questions.

Further, at the recent Conference of the States Parties, the United States took note of Ukraine's national statement, which stated there was "evidence coming to light of Russian military forces using riot control agents against Ukraine defensive units." Let me be clear. The use of riot control agents as a means of warfare is prohibited by the Convention.

Here too, States Parties have come together to support Ukraine. On February 23, 2023, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to call for a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine and for Russia to withdraw its troops. Related to the CWC, the Technical Secretariat and countless States Parties have responded to Ukraine's request for assistance and protection, as provided for under the Convention. We find it unsurprising, predictable, and disappointing that the Russian Federation sees it as appropriate to highlight the chemical defense preparedness support being provided to Ukraine and twist that support as threatening to Russia. If the Russian Federation had not invaded Ukraine, there would be no need for the international community to provide Ukraine such defensive equipment.

Mr. Chairperson, these are two recent examples of the use and concerns regarding the possible use of chemical weapons and of responsive, historic actions that have been taken together by State Parties to make clear that the international community is overwhelmingly united in its effort to fight against the use of chemical weapons. With these in mind and the Review Conference taking place in a mere two months, we need to consider what work we, as States Parties, should take forward to support the future of the Organization that will ensure it can continue its important mission.

First, the new ChemTech Center should be highlighted and showcased as a key tool that will strengthen the capabilities of the OPCW to implement its mandate in the future. The Center will further strengthen the OPCW's ability to facilitate international cooperation and capacity-building in the years to come. The United States especially looks forward to the Center's ability to facilitate trainings and other initiatives to encourage geographic diversity of the designated laboratory network.

Second, the OPCW must remain prepared for non-routine missions, including challenge inspections, Technical Assistance Visits, and investigations of alleged CW use. The Organization should continue to focus on knowledge management and maintaining its current capabilities and expertise gained not only from investigative work of the IIT, but also from historical chemical weapons destruction operations. This is especially important considering the continued threat posed by State and non-State actors.

Third, given the continued threat of CW use, it is essential that the OPCW support capacity building related to deterring, responding to, and investigating CW use. The United States also supports the Scientific Advisory Board's suggestion to add biotoxins as a regular part of the Proficiency Testing process. Establishing an OPCW network recognized for expertise in identifying biotoxins, similar to what exists already for biomedical and environmental samples, would provide States Parties a much-needed tool in cases of an investigation of alleged use or a request for a technical assistance visit related to a biotoxin use. Now is the time to take appropriate steps to build this area of expertise as part of the OPCW Designated Lab network.

And, given the continued threat posed by State and Non-state Actors, the OPCW should prioritize International Cooperation and Assistance (ICA) programs in the areas of national implementation legislation, customs/border control, national inspectors, lab capabilities, and medical first responders. The Convention cannot be fully implemented without all States Parties having adequate national legislation in place to protect against the use of chemical weapons.

Fourth, we recommend that the OPCW improve organizational governance by supporting gender and geographic diversity and inclusion and expanding education and outreach. The United States remains committed to advancing the role of women in all areas of the Organization. Additionally, the OPCW should work to increase the visibility of the CWC, and the involvement of the broader international community, by supporting broader NGO participation in OPCW annual meetings.

Fifth, additional efforts should be undertaken by the Organization to encourage States not party to join. The Organization should prepare for that scenario by planning and gathering technical expertise that includes retaining CW destruction experience. With the complete destruction of the declared chemical weapons stockpiles, there is an even greater importance to ensuring the knowledge and expertise of chemical weapons destruction is maintained at the OPCW.

Mr. Chairperson, while these numerous recommendations have the support from large numbers of States Parties, the United States understands the reality that a few countries, which have resisted our collective efforts to address CW use in the past, will likely continue to do so by preventing consensus on a fulsome Review Conference report. Nonetheless, the United States will make a good faith attempt to recognize the work of the OPCW these past five years and to endorse investments in its future by consensus. Regardless of whether we are able to reach a consensus outcome document, we will continue to look for ways, consistent with the mandate provided by the Convention, to give the Organization the tools it needs to deter and respond to CW use into the future. The United States will not cease in its efforts to support the Organization and the Convention and ensure their readiness to face current and future chemical weapons threats.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would be remiss if I did not mention that as of February 18, the United States has completed destruction of over 99 percent of our declared chemical weapons stockpile. Both of our operating facilities are in their final destruction campaigns, and the United States remains on track to meet our planned completion date of September 2023.

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