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AUSTRALIA

STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR DR BRETT MASON PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF AUSTRALIA TO THE OPCW AT THE EIGHTY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Thank you, Madam Chairperson.

And may I first congratulate you on your successful leadership of this Executive Council (hereinafter “the Council”) throughout your tenure as Chairperson.

Events over the last year, and the challenges confronting our Council, were unprecedented. The confirmed use of chemical weapons by a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention has tested the resolve and utility of the OPCW and this Council like never before.

Australia is grateful for your firm stewardship throughout these difficult debates.

Australia was encouraged by this Council’s decision of 11 November. We, this Council, responded to the Joint Investigative Mechanism’s findings that the Syrian Government was responsible for at least three chemical weapon attacks in the Syrian Arab Republic, and also to the ongoing concerns about gaps and discrepancies in Syria’s declaration.

Australia desired a stronger decision, but we recognise that a compromise text was necessary.

And Australia would have preferred that the decision be adopted by consensus. Throughout the OPCW’s proud 20-year history, much of its success can be credited to our spirit of consensus decision-making.

But consensus is not an end in itself.

Yes, of course reaching consensus is highly desirable. Consensus is often the best possible means of achieving the ends we all seek – the elimination of chemical weapons and the prohibition of their use.

But our desire for consensus must never be allowed to prevent this Council from fulfilling our responsibilities, our obligations to enforce the Chemical Weapons Convention and sanction those States Parties who use chemical weapons.



A desirable means must not frustrate a necessary end. For if it does, consensus will leave our Organisation subject to the lowest common denominator and will render us incapable of meeting the challenge of non-proliferation.

We acknowledge that this Council's November decision did not receive unanimous support. Indeed, of the 41 members of this Council, four voted against it.

Nevertheless, it was adopted with the affirmative support of two-thirds of Council members.

But for our decision to have real meaning – for it to have impact – it must be carried out fully and without delay. And it is now our responsibility to ensure its complete and swift implementation.

We are glad to learn that the inspections of Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Centre have just now occurred. But their initial postponement – contrary to the repeated assurances as to the safety of those sites by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security – only raises further questions about the veracity of Syria's cooperation. Intransigence, obstruction and delay cannot be accepted by this Council.

The Joint Investigative Mechanism highlights another serious threat to our security – the threat of non-State actors acquiring and using chemical weapons. And just last weekend, we have heard reports of further chemical weapon attacks in Mosul, Iraq.

Australia did not hesitate to lend our support to the draft decision on non-State actors. The text enshrines basic and necessary measures which we must all take to minimise the risk of chemical weapon material and technologies falling into the hands of terrorists.

We urge all Council members to support the draft decision.

We also have before us a draft decision proposing the addition of new chemicals to the OPCW Central Analytical Database. Keeping the database up-to-date is vital in ensuring that the Convention's verification regime is keeping pace with developments in science and technology.

Australia will support this draft decision, and we urge others to do likewise.

This session cannot pass without States Parties acknowledging the recent assassination carried out in Malaysia, reportedly using the nerve agent VX. And can I acknowledge the statements to this Council by the Ambassador of Malaysia and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea. This matter highlights the importance we all attach to universal adherence to the Convention and its obligations. It also underscores the need for our Technical Secretariat to have the resources and expertise to assist States Parties when needed.

Australia and a growing number of States Parties have expressed concern about the use of highly toxic chemicals – particularly those affecting the central nervous system – for law enforcement purposes.

The high toxicity of chemicals such as fentanyl prevents them from being dispersed en masse, through the air, without serious risk of death or permanent injury. They cannot legitimately be considered “non-lethal weapons”.

Australia and many other States Parties are seeking a start to discussions in the OPCW on central nervous system-acting chemicals, and we regularly submit a joint paper on this subject to Conferences of the States Parties.

Since the last Conference, we are delighted to welcome three new supporters of the paper: Ecuador, the Philippines, and Senegal. We have therefore submitted the joint paper to this session of the Council, in order to acknowledge and welcome their support.

I encourage other States Parties to join the growing number of voices calling for open, inclusive discussions on this important subject.

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