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RUSSIAN FEDERATION

**STATEMENT BY THE DELEGATION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AT THE
FIFTIETH MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Mr Chairperson,

Three new OPCW Fact-Finding Mission reports on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic have been submitted for consideration at today's special meeting of the Executive Council.

In this regard, we would first like to note the extensive work done by the Mission and express our gratitude to its personnel for their bravery and dedication to completing the tasks set before them.

Unfortunately, these reports were not available in Russian or in the other official OPCW languages besides English until two weeks ago (9 November) which, you will agree, allowed extremely little time for a comprehensive analysis by the relevant agencies. However, as we understand how important it is that the Executive Council discuss these reports before the Director-General submits them to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Russian delegation has tried to analyse these documents as much as was possible in the time allotted.

Our main conclusions are as follows.

First of all, like other delegations, we are seriously concerned by the findings of the experts of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission—with varying degrees of confidence in specific incidents—that chemical weapons have again been used in the Syrian Arab Republic. In this regard, we believe it is important to again state our decisive and unconditional condemnation of the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, at any time, and under any circumstances as an action that goes against the grain of the norms of international law and universal human morals. It is for this very reason that we supported the decision of the Director-General to establish the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission as well as the resolution of the United Nations Security Council to establish a Joint Investigative Mechanism to look into these incidents.

Second, we cannot ignore that the findings of the reports on different incidents vary in terms of the degree to which the use of chemical weapons was confirmed. There are objective reasons for this: the presence or absence of credible witness reports and material evidence obtained in keeping with recognised procedures.



For example, with regard to the incident in Marea (in the Aleppo Governorate) the evidence of the use of sulfur mustard gives rise to practically no doubts: the Mission itself was involved in collecting samples from the casualties which, even in the absence of other material evidence, is more than sufficient.

However, the same cannot be said for the incidents in the Governorates of Idlib and Jober, the reports for which note only a certain level of probability of the use of chemical weapons (likely chlorine in some cases, and an unidentified substance in others). We believe that based on the objective data that the OPCW experts had at their disposal (essentially only witness accounts), it was not possible to come to any other conclusion. That is why we would like to once again note the accuracy and balanced nature of the findings of the experts who, to the credit of their professional integrity, did not allow themselves to freely interpret the facts or to “spin” them to fit a preconceived notion.

We believe that this fundamental difference in the substantiation of the conclusions drawn from the Mission in Marea and the other incidents must be awarded the most careful attention by the experts of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, which will review the reports as per their competencies.

Third, we would like to address the comparative analysis of the Mission’s reports regarding the alleged use of chemical weapons in Jober (S/1318/2015) and the incidents in Idlib (S/1319/2015). In both cases, the Fact-Finding Mission conducted extensive work to collect and examine a full range of materials and evidence, and a large number of witnesses and casualties were interviewed.

However as we understand it, the Mission was not able to obtain any material evidence that was reliable and in line with the chain of custody. Actually, it follows from the report that OPCW experts gained access (albeit limited) to medical documents provided by the Syrian Government, although the same documents were not received for Idlib. We believe that such a substantial circumstance should also be taken into account by the Executive Council when evaluating the probability of the use of chemical weapons in said incidents.

And another moment. The Jober report leads us to believe that the assessment of little probability that chemical weapons were used there was impacted by inconsistencies among witness accounts, while the accounts obtained in Idlib were distinguished by an enviable uniformity, making it possible to speak of the alleged use of chlorine with greater certainty.

Of course, the completeness and consistency of witness accounts are an important criterion in evaluating evidence, although it wouldn’t hurt to also consider which witnesses the Mission interviewed. In Jober, everything was transparent and clear; interview candidates were selected by the Fact-Finding Mission from among affected government force soldiers and medical staff at the hospital where they were treated; their identities were easily confirmed based on official corresponding documents.

Then we have the complete opposite situation in Idlib: some non-governmental organisation—and it is unclear who it represents, where it is stationed, by whom it is financed, its authorities are vague, with equally foggy objectives and tasks and dubious expertise—presents a group of people who have been selected, but it remains unclear where or by what criteria. In this regard, the uniformity of their witness accounts appears to be more than a little suspicious, especially if one considers the ease with which these residents

of mostly remote villages used technical and chemical terms and diligently described one and the same scenario, even when the events took place in several locations and at different times. There are also questions when it comes to just how reliable the identification of these witnesses was in the absence of any reliable verification of their documents, and how they were determined to have been present in the locations of the alleged chemical attacks. Finally, the story with the medical documentation in Idlib being completely absent despite the numerous declared chlorine attacks also gives rise to legitimate concerns.

We are far from placing the blame for these flaws with the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission; its experts worked diligently and responsibly, as much as the complex situation in the field allowed. We hope that the experience that they gained and our feedback will help improve the way the Mission works and, we reiterate, it has yet to complete the investigation of several more incidents reported to the OPCW by the Syrian Government.

Our criticism is directed elsewhere. As the discussion has shown, a number of delegations have used the report on the incidents in the Idlib Governorate in order to form a subjective understanding of its contents and continue to make unfounded accusations aimed at the Syrian Government which, allegedly, stands behind the chlorine attacks despite the fact that no one has ever established any connection between the infamous helicopters and the appearance of certain objects on the ground. We categorically disagree with such an unscrupulous interpretation, which is completely at odds with the actual contents of the reports, which emphasise that the question as to specifically who used chemical weapons is beyond the purview of the OPCW Mission. Again: the assertions voiced here alleging the involvement of the Syrian Government in chemical attacks is nothing more than the private opinion of certain delegations, and not of the Executive Council.

We also believe it necessary to point out that the events in the Idlib Governorate as described in the Mission's report lead one to conclude that what we are in fact dealing with is the extensive provocation of terrorist groups which, as was demonstrated by the chemical attacks in Marea, do not burden themselves with any kind of moral or ethical reasoning.

A draft decision entitled "Further Reports of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria" is being submitted for consideration by the Executive Council. This draft decision was prepared by the delegations of the Russian Federation and the United States of America based in particular on the importance of supporting the Fact-Finding Mission's reports, which are to be delivered by the Director-General to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, with a consensus-based opinion from the Executive Council on this matter.

As today's discussion shows, like in February this year when we discussed the Mission's first three reports, there are different opinions about the new reports among the delegations: there were no disagreements among the delegations on Marea, but there are clear differences of opinion on Jobar and Idlib. In this regard, in order to obtain an objective picture of what happened, clearly—as has already been proposed by representatives of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa—additional evidence-based information in the introductory paragraph 4 of the draft is required, where it states that the Executive Council expressed various opinions on these reports.

We also expect that in line with his statement at the Forty-Eighth Meeting of the Executive Council, the Director-General will include not only the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission reports

in the monthly report to the United Nations Security Council, but also information on the discussion thereof by the Executive Council.

The events in Marea as well as other reports of the alleged use of chemical weapons in countries in the region, including Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, confirm our worst fears of what terrorists are capable of when it comes to the possession and use of chemical weapons in an attack against a country's armed forces and civilians.

In this regard I would like to place special emphasis—and we already discussed this at the Eightieth Session of the Executive Council—that the use of chemical weapons by Islamic State fighters for military and terrorist purposes is becoming increasingly large-scale and systemic in nature and reaching a new technological level. There is serious evidence that Islamic State terrorists have the ability to develop and produce chemical weapons components and their means of delivery. We also know that at least two countries have conducted their own internal investigations and confirmed the use of mustard agent by non-State actors in the region.

I am confident that the Executive Council must devote its most careful attention to this matter. In this regard, I would also like to note that many delegations—Canada, France, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Islamic Republic of Iran, India, and China—have also spoken today about the problem of chemical terrorism and the impermissibility of allowing chemical weapons to fall into the hands of non-State actors. We believe that the time has come for the OPCW to seriously consider what specific steps it should take in this regard.

We kindly request that this statement be circulated as an official document of the Fiftieth Meeting of the OPCW Executive Council and published on the Organisation's website.

Thank you, Mr Chairperson.

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