



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION
OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

12th WORLD CONGRESS OF PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATIONS

“THE ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL
WEAPONS AND PUBLIC HEALTH”

ADDRESS BY

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Istanbul, Turkey

28 April 2009

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1. It is a great honour for me to address the 12th World Congress of Public Health Associations, which has brought together such a large, diverse and distinguished body of public health officials and experts. I would like to begin by thanking the World Federation of Public Health Associations for their invitation to be here. I am also pleased to be joined on the dais today by my two distinguished colleagues, Ambassador Tibor Toth of the CTBTO in Vienna, and Richard Lennane of the BTWC in Geneva. Together I believe we will provide a very comprehensive perspective on the issue of weapons of mass destruction and public health.

2. I must admit to feeling a sense of *déjà vu* because I was here in Istanbul less than two weeks ago for an OPCW event on the Middle East. But it is always a pleasure for me to visit this beautiful city and to experience its impeccable hospitality. Turkey is a very proactive member of the OPCW and strong supporter of our work, and I extend a warm greeting to my many Turkish friends and colleagues.

3. I was especially pleased to accept the Federation's invitation to be with you today because this is the first time that I will address a gathering of public health experts in my capacity as Director-General of the OPCW. It is extremely important to understand the implications for public health both from the possible use of weapons of mass destruction and from programmes that are operating to destroy them.

4. It is also important that we understand how our work in the sphere of disarmament and non-proliferation intersects with your work in public

health, and to explore how we might strengthen engagement between our communities. The OPCW strongly promotes a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure full implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and we certainly consider public health bodies to be important stakeholders, especially in the area of assistance and protection.

The need for prevention

5. In simplest terms, we - like you - are in the prevention business. The 20th Century witnessed the development of ever more destructive weapons that were produced and stockpiled in enormous quantities. The end of the Cold War radically changed the geopolitical landscape and greatly lowered the risk of global conflagration. An immense threat has been lifted from large populations of Europe and Asia where there were large active stockpiles of chemical weapons. However, the task of ridding the world of these terrible weapons remains, as does the challenge of preventing the illicit spread of the technology and resources that produced them.

6. History has provided ample evidence of the profound damage caused to human beings by modern chemical weapons, which have been used more frequently than any other weapon of mass destruction. During the First World War an estimated one million soldiers were exposed to chlorine and mustard gas, 90,000 died, and countless more suffered painful lifelong effects to their health, especially pulmonary dysfunctions.

7. Today, nearly a century later, the government of Iran is providing specialised care for some 40,000 surviving veterans of chemical weapons attacks during the 1980s by Saddam Hussein. His regime also used them against the Kurdish town of Halabja, where thousands of Iraqi civilians

died on the spot and many more died in subsequent years from horrific complications and diseases. More recently, in March 1995, a Japanese religious cult attacked commuters in the Tokyo subway during rush hour with Sarin, a lethal nerve agent, an atrocity that highlighted the growing danger of terrorists and other non-State actors gaining access to chemical weapons.

8. As all of you are doubtless aware, one of the greatest achievements of public health in the 20th century was the eradication of smallpox, which has paid lasting dividends in lives saved and in savings to health care systems. Though we operate in a different sphere, the OPCW is engaged in a similar enterprise. Our goal is to permanently abolish – that is to say, eradicate -- an entire class of weapons of mass destruction by destroying all existing chemical weapons and ensuring that new ones do not emerge. This will prevent the possibility of chemical weapons being used, make a lasting contribution to global peace and security, and as important, eliminate a significant threat to public health. In implementing this mandate, the OPCW has pioneered the incorporation of health and safety activities into its programmes, a dimension that I will expand on in a moment. First allow me to briefly explain the framework and substance of our work.

The Convention and OPCW main activities

9. One of the most distinctive features of the Chemical Weapons Convention as an international arms control instrument is that it is non-discriminatory, meaning all of our States Parties have equal rights and obligations. Those who possess chemical weapons must destroy them according to given deadlines, and all States Parties are required to ensure that within their jurisdiction, chemistry is only used for peaceful

purposes. The OPCW verifies the compliance of States Parties with their obligations under the Convention with a strict regime of inspections. These inspections cover chemical weapons storage depots and destruction facilities, as well as industries that produce chemicals and precursors which could be used to make chemical weapons.

10. Another distinctive feature of the Convention is its ethos of mutual support, whereby States Parties pledge to provide assistance to other members should chemical weapons ever be used, or threatened to be used, against them. In case of need, OPCW is prepared to mobilise teams for medical assistance, detection and decontamination, and teams to provide the necessary infrastructure support for assistance operations.

11. At the same time, recognising that chemistry is one of the key sectors of global economic development, the OPCW promotes cooperation at the international level by encouraging the exchange of knowledge and expertise in this field.

12. These, then, are the four main components of our work: destroying chemical weapons and their associated means of production; ensuring the non-proliferation of such weapons; providing assistance and protection against their possible use; and promoting the peaceful uses of chemistry.

13. The popularity and achievements of the Chemical Weapons Convention are evident. After just 12 years of existence, the OPCW already counts 188 States Parties with over 98% of the world's population and chemical industry. This is the fastest rate of accession for any arms treaty in history and represents an overwhelming global

consensus which the OPCW has created against the development, production or use of chemical weapons.

14. In these 12 years, 43% of the world's declared chemical weapons have been verifiably destroyed, and possessor States have consistently demonstrated their firm commitment to completing destruction of their stockpiles by the April 2012 deadline set by the Convention. In addition, all of the production facilities for these weapons were de-activated early on, and all but a few have since been either destroyed or converted to peaceful uses.

15. To verify compliance with the provisions of the Convention, the OPCW has developed an effective regime of inspections for both demilitarisation and non-proliferation. As regards the latter, we have conducted a total of more than 1500 inspections of industrial facilities in 80 countries, and every day of the year, somewhere in the world, chemical industries are now being inspected by the OPCW. In this regard I should also note that the global chemical industry has been a key partner. It has actively promoted adherence to the Convention by its constituents, and helped to sustain the effectiveness of the inspections regime. This collaborative relationship is yet another distinctive feature of the Chemical Weapons Convention, and one that is essential to its full implementation.

Health and Safety

16. As I mentioned, health and safety are important elements in all of these activities and certainly in the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles. The Convention obligates States Parties not just to destroy their weapons, but to do so in ways that ensure the health and safety of

workers and surrounding communities, as well as protecting the environment. This is an extraordinarily challenging task. The global stockpiles declared to date have contained 71,000 tonnes of deadly chemical agents and 8.7 million individual munitions. They include large quantities of highly potent nerve agents like VX, a small vial of which, if properly disbursed, could kill everyone in a hall like this in a matter of minutes. So destroying these weapons is very dangerous, time-consuming and expensive.

17. As of today, three of the seven OPCW Member States that have declared possession of chemical weapons have completed destruction of their stockpiles. Russia, which has the world's largest, has destroyed nearly a third of its stockpile and the United States, with the second largest, has destroyed more than half. In every case, I am very proud to say that high standards of health and safety have been maintained in these efforts and serious accidents have been avoided. It is a tribute to the determination of the possessor States to comply with their obligations in the most conscientious way possible. However one area that I believe can and should be strengthened is community outreach. Residents who live in the vicinity of chemical weapons depots and destruction facilities are understandably concerned about the possible health risks to their families and communities. It serves everyone's interest that the activities and safeguards at these facilities be clearly explained to local leaders and opinion makers, and that regular communication be maintained with them as challenges and problems arise.

18. In addition to fulfilling its mandate for disarmament and non-proliferation, the OPCW has also made major contributions to strengthening the capacity of States Parties for assistance and protection

against chemical weapons by organising regular trainings in detection, protection and decontamination. These trainings typically target first responders, hazardous materials specialists, government experts and emergency response units, and are designed to strengthen national and regional capabilities and emergency response systems. To date, approximately 2,300 participants have benefited from these activities, and interest in them and support from States Parties has increased in recent years as a means to reduce the risk of terrorist attacks using chemical weapons.

19. However, we recognise that significant gaps still remain in preparedness, mainly in developing countries where resources are limited and the principal response units are fire brigades. Training activities in assistance and protection would benefit from greater involvement of health experts, particularly as regards developing greater capacity to recognize the signs and symptoms of chemical weapons. Just as early detection is critical to controlling an epidemic outbreak of disease, early recognition of chemical weapons use is critical to an effective response that can protect public health and save lives.

18. The OPCW has played an important role in helping to develop a global knowledge base in this area. Our Health and Safety Branch prepared the chapters on chemical weapons for the latest version of WHO's Guidance on Public Health Response to Biological and Chemical Weapons, published in 2004. The full text is available online and I would certainly invite all of you to review the guide as a standard reference in this field. The OPCW also participated with WHO and the International Atomic Energy Agency in a comparative study completed in 2005 which assessed national public health preparedness for weapons of mass

destruction. I would highlight that in almost every country studied, a major issue was simple lack of awareness about the potential threat to public health from these weapons. The study concluded that the most cost-effective way to improve response systems is to raise awareness and educate medical personnel.

19. To this end, the OPCW developed and conducts week-long training courses on detection, protection and decontamination. The course is based on lessons learned from events in recent decades such as the Bhopal disaster in India, the Iran-Iraq war, the Tokyo subway attack, and 9/11. In addition, we have provided financial assistance and technical expertise for an annual training course in medical defence against chemical weapons that has been held in each of the last nine years in Tehran. The course covers state-of-the-art knowledge on detection, protection and decontamination; on investigating alleged use of chemical weapons; and on the diagnosis and treatment of patients who have been exposed to nerve and blister agents. The course is generally regarded as the best available in this field, and more than 200 doctors from dozens of countries have benefited from participation.

20. All of these training activities are conducted under Article X of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which requires the OPCW to provide expert advice on how State Parties can improve their protection against chemical weapons. Under this Article we also maintain a databank with information on protection against chemical weapons that is freely available to States Parties, as well as a network of specialists from more than 20 countries with expertise in various aspects of chemical protection.

Chemical weapons and terrorism

21. A final observation I would make about health and safety as it concerns our work is in relation to terrorism. During the past decade there has been a quantum shift in the location of chemical production facilities from west to east as a result of the industry's pursuit of greater cost efficiencies and proximity to emerging markets. This shift has spurred economic development, created jobs and generated prosperity, and is without doubt a public good.

22. But this has also increased the challenge of maintaining adequate protection and safety, especially in regard to terrorism. Consequently, the OPCW is exploring ways to promote implementation of measures for ensuring that industries engaged in the production of toxic chemicals have proper safeguards to prevent access to these chemicals by terrorists and other non-State actors. Such facilities also need to be adequately protected against the threat of terrorist attacks, which would pose significant dangers to public health and safety in the areas where they are located.

23. The threat of terrorists using chemical weapons has also created renewed interest in the OPCW's ability to coordinate delivery of emergency assistance in the event of an attack, or the threat of such an attack. The ease with which some commonly available toxic chemical compounds can be used for nefarious purposes, using rudimentary but widely available knowledge to weaponise them, makes it incumbent on States Parties to be aware of and address the existing dangers. Full implementation of the Convention by all States Parties, working together

in all regions and with all stakeholders, is an essential means to reduce the threat.

24. This also accords entirely with the objectives of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540. The OPCW is not an anti-terrorism agency, but the comprehensive prohibition of chemical weapons that falls within its remit has an important contribution to make in this area. The Organisation's role in this context is specifically recognised in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the General Assembly in 2006, and which the Assembly reaffirmed in September of last year.

Universality of the Convention

25. In concluding, I would like to offer some final observations about the crucial need for universality of the Chemical Weapons Convention. As I stated at the outset of my presentation, in its first 12 years of existence the OPCW has already attracted 188 State Parties that collectively represent more than 98% of the world's population and chemical industry. This has reduced to just seven the number of UN Member States that have not yet joined – namely Angola, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Israel, Myanmar, Syria, and Somalia.

26. However, achieving universality of the Chemical Weapons Convention will remain essential to its ultimate success. The Convention is only as strong as its weakest link and the absence of any State - whether large or small, rich or poor, but particularly one that might have an active chemical weapons programme or stockpiles - undermines the goal of achieving a total ban on these weapons. Universality will contribute to a climate of enhanced confidence in existing treaty

structures and help promote further steps towards greater international security and stability.

27. On my part, I strongly believe there is no justification, moral or strategic, for retaining the chemical weapons option. Chemical weapons are of decreasing strategic significance in military terms and basically instruments of terror against civilians. Quite appropriately, therefore, the Second Review Conference of the Chemical Weapons Convention that was held last April strongly urged the remaining States not Party to ratify or accede to the Convention as a matter of urgency and without preconditions. We must relentlessly continue to raise this issue with those countries. I have been keenly committed to this goal from day one of my tenure, and will remain so until the end of it.

Thank you.