



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Remarks on the Occasion of Armistice Day 2017

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REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Mayor of Ieper, Honourable Mr. Jan Durnez,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am grateful to the City of Ieper for giving me the opportunity to reflect on the events that consumed this area more than a century ago.

I would also like to take this moment to commend the City for creating in the historic and symbolic Cloth Hall building the 'In Flanders Fields museum', which conveys to all whom visit a true understanding of what men endured in the trenches and battlefields.

Ieper maintains a special place within the institutional memory of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. It was here on 22 April 1915 that toxic chemicals were used for the first time on a large scale as a weapon.

Many soldiers had an agonising death that spring day, and more than 90,000 others would suffer similar fates before the war was over. To make sure that what Ieper means to our mission is never lost, the OPCW named its Council chamber 'the Ieper Room'.

The purpose of our gathering today holds a dual significance. We are commemorating the ninety-ninth anniversary of the end of the First World War, as well as the one-hundredth anniversary of the conclusion of the Battle of Passchendaele.

We remember that battle as 'the campaign of mud' or as the celebrated British historian, A.J.P. Taylor, eloquently described it – "the blindest slaughter of a blind war." The gains in territory were meagre, but the cost in lives was overwhelming.

As the OPCW, we remember Passchendaele as the battle that introduced the world to sulphur mustard – better known as mustard gas.

Named for its pungent smell, sulphur mustard works by causing painful skin blisters and blindness and lingers on the battlefield for days after its dispersal. Its use made the already atrocious conditions around Ieper intolerable.

One hundred years on from those horrors and twenty years since the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the international community has made great strides in ensuring that we never again suffer the dreadfulness of chemical warfare.

Under the watchful eye of the OPCW, 96% of declared chemical weapon stockpiles have been destroyed and the full destruction process will be completed by 2023. Furthermore, 192 countries are party to the CWC, which equates to 98% of the world's population under the Convention's protection.

Regrettably, the spectre of Passchendaele continues to hang over us. Chemical Weapons are still being used, in the Syria and elsewhere. This should remind us that even as chemical stockpiles move towards zero, we must remain vigilant in order to keep the world chemical weapons free. When the CWC entered into force in 1997, it marked the final step in the legal codification of an existing taboo against these weapons. The origins of that movement grew from the shared abhorrence of the soldiers who fought here to gas warfare.

With the conclusion of these centennial ceremonies, we cannot allow the costly lessons of the First World War to fade. Upholding the international norm embodied in the CWC, that so many for so long strove to establish, is one way to preserve those lessons of the past.

It was with this objective in mind that in 2015 on the centenary of the first gas attack, we returned to this City of Peace to re-commit ourselves to the goals of the CWC in the form of the Ieper Declaration. That occasion not only served as a moment to contemplate a low point in human history, but it was also a renewed call for action.

We have recognised, nevertheless, that more sustained efforts are required to realise the Convention's goals. There is a need to interact with relevant stakeholders such as the scientific community, the chemical industry and academia. Reaching out to the younger generations and promoting their ownership of our goals is essential.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A common refrain that we hear on Armistice Day is 'Lest we forget'. It is invoked to ensure that the memory of those who perished in Flanders fields endures.

In honouring their sacrifice, however, we must learn from their experiences to create a better world. This shall require us to be alert to the existing dangers and to continue to do what is right. The OPCW will continue to play its part in these endeavours.

I thank you for your attention.
