

Remembrance Day for the Victims of Chemical Warfare

Statement by the Director-General

29 April 2015

Madam Chairperson,
Honourable Mayor van Aartsen,
Her Excellency Ms Nora Stehouwer-Van Iersel,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

This day of remembrance comes after one hundred years since chemical weapons were first used on a large scale during World War I.

Last week the States parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention gathered in Ieper, Belgium, to commemorate that fateful day in April 1915, which saw the birth of chemical warfare. It was sobering to stand on the battlefields around Ieper; to look out over the fields, so calm and peaceful now; where so much carnage took place, where we first saw the use of poison as a weapon of mass destruction.

Chemical weapons have too often cast a dark shadow over the twentieth century, claiming countless victims, both civilians and soldiers across the globe.

Each year, we gather here to honour the memory of all those victims.

We do this not only because it is our sacred duty, but also because the act of remembrance re-commits us to never again allow any person to fall victim to these barbarous weapons.

To never again hear that lives have been blighted by these dreadful weapons. To never again see the fear on the victims faces, or see the contorted bodies of the dead.

We have spent the better part of the past century waging a long, and ultimately successful struggle against such weapons.

Since the Chemical Weapons Convention was opened for signature in 1993, almost eight decades after Ieper, it has quickly come to encompass 190 States.

Together, we have so far eliminated 87% of the world's declared stockpiles of chemical weapons.

The scale of our success, and the gains we continue to record, provide this year's commemoration with no small measure of consolation.

For we best honour the memory of the victims by ridding the world of the weapons that claimed or permanently scarred their lives.

This arduous journey has been fraught with challenges.

And events such as those that came to pass in Syria all too clearly remind us that the threat posed by chemical weapons has not been entirely removed.

Therefore, on this Remembrance Day, following the issue of the historic Ieper Declaration by States Parties, we renew our resolve to achieve a world truly free of chemical weapons.

We must re-dedicate ourselves to this mission, with the same political will that fuelled the creation of the global ban against these weapons.

Rapid progress is being made towards completing the destruction of remaining stockpiles.

Our national capacity-building programmes and training for Member States continue to enhance implementation of the Convention, as well as capacity for responding to chemical attacks or accidents involving toxic chemicals.

But the effectiveness of this Convention as a permanent barrier against chemical weapons will require more concerted effort.

We cannot allow our disarmament success to cloud our view of new proliferation challenges.

If the Chemical Weapons Convention is to retain its relevance, it will have to be responsive to new threats – such as those posed by terrorist groups and other non-state actors.

The Convention will also have to be responsive to the possible impact that new developments in science and technology could have on how we implement it in the future.

In all this, we must always bear in mind that the global norm against chemical weapons is not just a legal one.

It is also a moral one – one that broaches no reservations or qualifications.

It is enough to mention the names of Ieper, Halabja, Sardasht and Ghouta to evoke painful images of suffering and death.

At the same time, it is important that survivors do not become mere symbols of suffering.

They are fellow humans who deserve our active support and assistance.

This is why the OPCW has lent its strong support to the Victims Assistance Network, including by allocating funds to it from the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Organisation in 2013. In this context, the Secretariat has assembled a group of eminent experts on toxic chemicals who are today at the OPCW. They will develop a guide for practitioners who will be the first to respond to any incident involving chemical weapons or toxic chemicals and treat the people who may be exposed to them.

Our commitment to victims must go beyond helping them – we must offer them hope that they will be the last to know the horrors of chemical warfare.

To secure a future that will never again experience these weapons, it is vital that we protect, strengthen and extend the norm enshrined by the Chemical Weapons Convention.

No country can justify being outside this norm under any circumstances.

All six countries still not party to the Convention must join it without delay.

Together, we must secure truly universal and diligent adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

We must embed this norm in our scientific endeavours, in our schools, in our public consciousness, over present and future generations.

This must be our commitment to honouring the memory of the victims. To acknowledge their suffering, and to ensure that their children and children's children never witness the horror of chemical weapons.

Thank you.