

Centennial Commemoration of the First Large-Scale Use of Chemical Weapons, Ieper, 21 April 2015

Statement by H.E. Mr. Steven Vandeput, Minister of Defense of the Kingdom of Belgium

Mr. Mayor,

Your Excellences, distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Belgian Government I wish to welcome all national and international delegations, here present today in Ieper for this important commemoration.

It is important that representatives of the international community are present, as the events a hundred years ago on this location introduced a whole new level of inhumane cruelty to war in general.

On April 22nd 1915 the waves of chlorine gas struck the battlefield for the first time in history without any warning. With the opening of the canisters and the spread of the toxic yellow-green clouds, a new kind of warfare was introduced. Military force and chemical science were combined into a devastating and inhumane war tactic. After the events of April 22nd chemical weapons continued to be used, both on the Western and Eastern front. The technique of chemical weapons was further refined and new, even deadlier types such as mustard gas, were introduced.

The horror caused by the use of chemical weapons in the Great War directly led to the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which banned the use of chemical weapons, but not their production and possession. Though the taboo on the use of chemical weapons grew the following decades, the War between Iraq and Iran in the nineteen eighties showed the need for a stricter norm and a comprehensive ban, backed up by credible verification methods. The Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 was a major achievement and it remains the most far reaching disarmament and non-proliferation treaty in our history.

However, the tragic events in Syria today, where the civilian population has fallen victim to chemical atrocities, show us that there is still a lot of work to be done in this area. That's why the work of the OPCW continues to be crucial in enforcing the international norm against the use of chemical weapons.

The Explosive Ordnance Disposal Company of the Belgian army, DOVO, provides regular training courses for OPCW inspectors. Belgium is keen to share its expertise in chemical weapons disposal. This specific knowledge has been accumulated through hard necessity. The soil in this region in the West of Flanders is still full of World War I relics. Every year, around 200 tons of World War I ammunition is found. Very often, this "iron" harvest is discovered by farmers ploughing their lands. About 5 % of the found ammunition are chemical weapons, which have to be disposed of through various specialized techniques in function of their type. The dedicated company of the army works all the year to eliminate these remnants of World War I. One of the first investment programs during this government term was the acquisition of a new more performing dismantling plant to treat this chemical ammunition.

Appreciation of the work of the OPCW should not be limited to Government officials. The exhibition on OPCW, opened later today, will help to expand the knowledge about its crucial work to the wide public. The contribution of my own department to this exhibition is courtesy of the Defense Laboratories (DLD) which will display the evolution of individual protective equipment and detection techniques.

The battle of April 22nd 1915 left a cruel legacy, but mankind has embarked upon a path towards a future, free of chemical weapons. We all have the duty to finish that path, to work tirelessly towards the moment the world will be free of chemical weapons of any kind.

Thank you for your attention.