

COMMEMORATION OF THE FIRST LARGE-SCALE USE OF CHEMICAL
WEAPONS, IEPR, 21 APRIL 2015

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ON BEHALF OF THE WESTERN EUROPEAN AND OTHER STATES GROUP

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the 29 countries that make up the Western European and Other States Group (WEOG).

Our group includes some of the countries most closely involved in the events on that fateful day one hundred years ago, countries which developed and used chemical weapons on a massive scale against their opponents. On the basis of this shared trauma, I wish to acknowledge and embrace the special responsibility felt by WEOG members in contributing to the elimination of chemical weapons.

Our commitment does not merely flow from a sense of responsibility. It comes from something deeper, something widely shared by those present here: the profound conviction that chemical weapons are inhumane devices; that their use is contrary to the basic norms shared by all humankind, even in warfare. And this, in turn, flows from the unspeakable suffering these weapons inflict on their victims.

These words “unspeakable suffering” indicate that it is near impossible to describe the effects chemical weapons have on a person. Preparing for this commemoration I came across an eye-witness account that I would like to share with you. These are the words of a Canadian soldier, who witnessed the first chlorine gas attack. He first describes how soldiers in the trenches look in amazement at a greenish-yellow cloud that starts rolling across the fields. He continues, and I quote:

“Then passive curiosity turned to active torment – a burning sensation in the head, red-hot needles in the lungs, the throat seized as by a strangler. Many fell and died on the spot. The others, gasping, stumbling with faces contorted, hands wildly gesticulating, and uttering hoarse cries of pain, fled madly through the villages and

farms and through Ypres itself, carrying panic to the remnants of the civilian population and filling the roads with fugitives of both sexes and all ages.”¹

This description of what actually happened on the 22nd of April 1915 provides a haunting illustration of what is often referred to as the “scourge of chemical weapons”. These images must motivate us, as human beings, to not stand by idly while fellow humans suffer this most horrendous fate.

The memory of what happened here one century ago should also serve as a stark reminder that today, one-hundred years on, elsewhere in the world people are still falling victim to chemical warfare. This knowledge must reinforce our determination to ensure that chemical weapons are banned completely and forever.

We express the hope that the horrors of Ieper that we commemorate today will strengthen our common commitment to the world-wide prohibition of chemical weapons.

¹ - A.T. Hunter, *Canadian Soldier, who witnessed the first chlorine gas attack. Excerpt from “Canada in the Great World War” (1919), The Second Battle of Ypres.*