CSCM – World Congress on CBRNe Science and Consequence Management

Remarks by Ahmet Üzümcü, Director-General OPCW

Monday 2 June 2014
Tbilisi, Georgia

H.E. the Minister of Internal Affairs,

H.E. the Minister of Health,

H.E. the Minister of Environment,

Deputy Ministers,

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants to the Congress,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent speeches and statements, I have sought to emphasise the comprehensive and holistic nature of the regime administered by the OPCW in implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention – for good reason.

Our mission can only be as effective as the confidence of our members is high. A vital part of this is the CWC's balance between rights and obligations, between benefits and responsibilities. Importantly, the provision of assistance and protection for dealing with the use of chemical weapons is an area where these rights and obligations find a very practical application.

As set out in Article X of the CWC, the OPCW assists State Parties in developing their capacity to deal with chemical weapons attacks, or the threat of such attacks. This capacity is equally valuable in responding to either intended or accidental release of toxic industrial chemicals.

As part of this, the OPCW also works with interested States Parties in developing consequence management capacity to enable them to respond effectively to chemical attacks, as well as other incidents in which toxic chemicals are accidentally released.

The OPCW has already conducted three exercises to this end and will continue to expand this programme.

The OPCW programme to provide assistance both in capacity-building and consequence management is delivered by means of regional and sub-regional exercises. This approach is designed to leverage regional commonalities and to ensure that the time lapse between the request for assistance and its delivery is as short as possible. The idea behind these exercises, therefore, is to create common awareness of different approaches to managing risks, to share lessons learned, and to determine best practices.

The OPCW has also worked with regional and international organisations responsible for consequence management. This has been, and continues to be, a two-way street. We have provided expert advice on matters related to emergency response for release of chemical warfare agent or toxic industrial chemicals, no less than we have drawn on those organisations' experience for further enhancing our own capacity.

In this regard, our cooperation with relevant partners, such as the 1540 Committee, the European Union, INTERPOL and UNICRI, also ensures that our activities avoid duplication and that they work to supplement each other by creating new synergies.

One striking example is agreement between the OPCW and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on a set of interface procedures, as well as our ongoing collaboration with a number of other agencies to ensure that international responses to chemical incidents are coordinated, timely and effectively.

Finally, the OPCW maintains a readiness to respond, in terms of materiel and expertise, to requests for assistance from States Parties in cases of the use or threat of use of chemical weapons. This means coordinating the delivery of protective equipment, detection and decontamination equipment, medical counter-measures and expert advice from States Parties as part of their commitment under Article X of the Convention.

In all of this, our partnerships with science is crucial. They inform almost every area of the OPCW's activity, and our work in the area of consequence management is no exception – far from it.

The OPCW Scientific Advisory Board is a key vehicle in this regard. It is a rotating group of twenty-five independent experts from around the world, who advise us on discoveries in science and technology. Among these are discoveries that improve and enhance our ability to respond to, and mitigate, the effects of chemical exposure.

I have recently released the Board's report on the most effective current practices for responding to nerve agent and blister agent exposure, as well as fact sheets that Board members have compiled on ricin and saxitoxin.

These documents serve as important reference materials for health and safety issues well beyond the particular interests of the chemical disarmament community.

At their upcoming meeting this June, we will be asking Scientific Advisory Board members to consider medical countermeasures that have been shown to mitigate long-term health effects resulting from exposure to chemical agents.

But with the rapid pace of scientific and technological developments and generation of new knowledge, our Scientific Advisory Board cannot work in isolation. We rely on extended networks of scientists that branch out from our Board members, as well as our active engagement with the scientific community at large through States Parties and OPCW staff members.

Let me list just a few examples that are attracting our interest.

From the life sciences, extensive research on neurological diseases – such as epilepsy, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease – have generated important knowledge on the biological mechanisms that are affected by nerve agents and, thus, allowed us to develop improved countermeasures. Research in other areas have had equally important contributions for other

types of chemical exposure in relation to both immediate emergency response and longer-term recovery.

From materials science and nanotechnologies, we see reports of new materials with self-cleaning and decontaminating properties that show promise for use in protective clothing and coatings.

And from the analytical sciences, we see new types of chemical and biochemical sensors that can enhance our ability to selectively detect toxic agents and improve response time.

Our extended network of experts goes out into a broad range of scientific disciplines and clearly illustrates the new trends in converging science as a means of effecting technological development.

We must be alert not only to the challenges presented by a rapidly changing strategic environment, but also new opportunities. Globalisation of the chemical industry, rapid advances in science and technology and the digital revolution can serve to enhance the efficiency of our protective equipment and medical counter-measures as well as shorten our response time.

In this regard, we do not need to look any further than the unprecedented mission for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons. It has made a strong case for maximum responsiveness and an ability to innovate on the part of the OPCW and States Parties.

The mission's success so far has relied on a collective international effort, in which the whole far exceeds the sum of its parts. Notable among these are: generous, well-coordinated financial and in-kind assistance of a large number of countries; creative technical solutions for verification during the preparations for the removal of chemicals; innovative methods of destroying chemicals at sea; and the engagement of the private sector to dispose of other chemicals.

To obtain maximum value out of this experience and other opportunities, it is vital that we share information and exchange best practices. I am very much looking forward to the outcome of this conference. For while toxic chemicals do not respect borders, neither should our efforts be bound within such borders. It is in this context that the OPCW has decided to support this conference.

I wish you all a successful Congress.

Thank you.