Chemical Disarmament: The Syria Mission and Beyond

Ahmet Üzümcü, Director-General OPCW

Complutense University of Madrid

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Honorable Professor Carrillo Menéndez [Rector of the University],
Honorable Professor
Distinguished guests,
Faculty and students,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a distinct honour to be able to address you here at Madrid's Complutense University, one of the oldest universities in Europe and a world-renowned centre of academic excellence.

Over the centuries, your alumni have included medical pioneers, distinguished playwrights, Nobel Prize winners and prime ministers of Spain. But also members of the SAB of our Organisation the current member Dr Alvarez and Dr Sierra the previous member.

What connects these fine men and women is not just this august institution but also their shared contribution to humanity in their respective fields of expertise.

With this in mind, I would like to use this lecture to describe the OPCW's mission to use science in the service of humanity in the context of the challenges we face, both current and emerging.

The OPCW acts as the guardian of the Chemical Weapons Convention, a comprehensive regime geared towards not only overseeing the destruction of chemical weapons, but also preventing their re-emergence and fostering peaceful uses of chemistry.

One of the biggest challenges for the Convention will be to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in the face of new advances in science and technology – advances that could test its integrity and implementation.

But let us first look back at the long journey we have travelled to establish a regime that has allowed our Organisation to record the achievements honoured in 2013 by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.

On the 22nd of April, we will mark the hundredth anniversary of the first large-scale use of chemical weapons near Ieper in Belgium.

On that day, a century ago, 170 tons of chlorine gas was used in the battle field, creating a veil of greenish-yellow mist which filled the lungs of 10,000 soldiers.

Half of the men suffocated within ten minutes of the gas reaching the front line.

Those who survived were left blinded and blistered, going on to live broken lives.

By the end of the First World War, chemical weapons used by both sides to the conflict had inflicted more than a million casualties.

The widespread use of these weapons stands as one of the war's most haunting legacies, despite the prior ban against them in the form of the 1899 Hague Convention.

It prompted a push to devise a more binding norm against the use of chemical weapons in the form of the 1925 Geneva Protocol.

But, while the Geneva Protocol prohibited use of chemical and biological weapons, it did not ban their possession and production.

Nor, unfortunately, did it prevent chemical weapons from being used.

The place names of Halabja in Iraq and Sardasht in Iran have become synonymous with the human misery resulting from civilians being attacked with these heinous weapons.

The impunity with which such attacks were perpetrated and their indiscriminate nature, especially in the Iran-Iraq War, finally rallied the international community to take decisive action.

It was against this backdrop – almost one hundred years after the Hague Convention – that a comprehensive global ban against chemical weapons came into being.

Following long and arduous negotiations in Geneva, the Chemical Weapons Convention was concluded in 1992, entering into force in 1997.

More than two decades since it was concluded, the Convention remains the most far-reaching disarmament and non-proliferation treaty in the history of multilateral arms control.

To this day, it is the only international treaty that not only bans an entire class of weapons of mass destruction, but also has the authority and mechanisms for policing this ban through international verification.

The Convention is comprehensive.

This means that it prohibits not only the use of chemical weapons, but also their development, production, stockpiling, transfer and retention – something that was missing in the chemical disarmament treaties preceding it.

The Convention is also non-discriminatory, committing all of its Member States, without exception, to its prohibitions and obligations.

Under its provisions, there can never be any ‘chemical weapon states.’

Those very few Member States that have chemical weapons must destroy them, and those that do not must commit never to acquire them.

Most importantly in contributing to the Convention's unique success, all members are subject to an international verification regime administered by the Convention's implementing body, the OPCW.

This verification regime comprises regular inspection of chemical industry to ensure its production is exclusively for peaceful purposes.

It also includes a challenge inspection mechanism. Any member can call for investigation of another member on the basis of well-founded concerns over compliance.

Guided by the Convention, the OPCW also works closely with its Member States, as well as industry and scientists around the world, to protect against chemical attacks and to promote peaceful uses of chemistry.

It is these provisions that have made the Chemical Weapons Convention the remarkable success that it is today.

In only seventeen years, the OPCW has seen its membership grow to 190 Member States.

Over the same period, our Organisation has verified the destruction of some 87% of all declared chemical weapons, and we have conducted over 2,500 inspections of industrial facilities in more than 80 countries.

It is with great pride that I can say that it is this record of tangible achievement that earned the OPCW the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013.

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Most recently, the resilience of the Convention and the adaptability of the OPCW were demonstrated during our Organisation's unprecedented mission to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons.

Syria’s accession to the Convention meant that there was no need for a specially mandated ad-hoc arrangement to oversee the removal and destruction process – the extensive provisions of the Convention were more than ample for achieving Syria’s chemical demilitarization.

It is worth briefly recalling how this process unfolded.

The gruesome sarin-gas attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, together with the international outcry that followed, precipitated an extraordinary series of events.

The Framework Agreement between Russia and the United States paved the way for a historic decision by the OPCW’s Executive Council on 27 September 2013 on an accelerated programme for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons.

As a measure of the international community's resolve, this decision was endorsed that same day by unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2118.

It was a day of highly effective diplomacy in response to what only weeks before was a completely unforeseen situation.

For its part, the OPCW rose to the challenge.

Our first team of inspectors arrived in Damascus within four days after the Executive Council decision was adopted, and the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria was formally established on 16 October.

Little more than a year after the Executive Council decision, all declared chemical weapons were removed from Syrian territory, and 98% of them have since been destroyed – including all sulfur mustard and nerve agent precursors.

The OPCW is still pursuing its mandate in further clarifying Syria's declaration and expediting destruction of a few remaining chemical weapon production facilities.

We are also continuing to follow-up allegations of chlorine gas attacks in Syria through the work of the Fact-Finding Mission, which I established last April and which has so far issued three reports.

In brief, our work in Syria has been a remarkable achievement, by any measure – let alone in the context of such challenging circumstances and compressed timeframes.

The mission has also stretched us to new limits.

Quite apart from demanding a great deal of professional commitment and personal courage on the part of personnel deployed to Syria, it required flexibility and innovation on the part of our Member States.

Some 35 of them provided in-kind and financial assistance in what has been an unprecedented international effort.

This includes the vital support of the United Nations in our Joint Mission in dealing with daunting logistical and security challenges.

And by working together we were also able to overcome obstacles by using innovative technological solutions.

These included facilitating sea-based destruction through the installation of two Field Deployable Hydrolysis Systems on board the Cape Ray, the US vessel that hosted neutralization operations for nearly two months.

We also pioneered private-public partnerships by engaging commercial companies in destruction operations through a tender process.

From all of this, we can draw a very simple conclusion.

Multilateral solutions are enduring, where they can draw on an effective and comprehensive instrument, and on the political will of the international community.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The confirmed use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013 reminded us that we need to extend our reach, if our success is to be complete.

That is why one of our most immediate challenges – one that flows directly from Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention – is to persuade the six countries that still remain outside the Convention to join it, without delay and without conditions.

These countries are Angola, Egypt, Israel, Myanmar, North Korea and South Sudan. We have been informed two days ago that Myanmar's parliament has approved the ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The instrument of ratification may be finalized for submission to the Secretary-General of the United Nations by the end of February.

No person should be subject to chemical attacks or the threat of such attacks.

And no country should be allowed to leave any doubt in anyone's mind about reserving the right to hold and use such weapons – weapons that are universally regarded as taboo.

The international community's reaction to the chemical attacks in Syria has only served to reaffirm its unity on this principle.

We cannot therefore rest until all chemical weapons have been destroyed and all countries of the world are party to the Convention, in both letter and spirit.

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As we fast approach the long cherished goal of global chemical disarmament, it is important that we position ourselves to ensure that we can make our gains permanent.

This means adapting to a rapidly changing strategic environment and seizing the opportunity not only to broaden adherence to the Convention – but also to guard against the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

Our success in achieving this objective will depend in large part on how well we get to grips with scientific and technological progress.

In this regard, it is my strong view that progress in law and ethics must keep pace with advances in science.

As a global civilisation we have reached great heights of scientific accomplishment, but we have also acquired the science to invent ever more destructive weapons and technologies.

This goes to the heart of the challenge facing the OPCW.

What we are more often dealing with, are materials and technologies that have multiple uses.

They can render great benefits for human and economic development, but they can also render great harm if misused.

This ‘dual-use dilemma’ goes to the very core of what makes our task so challenging.

Given the sheer pace of the discovery of new chemical substances, we need to rethink our strategies.

This means developing new synergies between governments and industry, scientists and civil society that can serve to advance the goals of the Convention.

To supplement our monitoring and control measures, for example, we need to create new proactive partnerships that promote responsible science.

To this end, in a bottom-up approach, we at the OPCW are expanding our education and outreach efforts in relation to professional associations and universities.

And we are working with our Member States and their industry representatives to devise codes of ethics to prevent the misuse of science, as well as to find more effective ways of securing compliance with the Convention.

Our message is clear.

Scientists must have a very clear sense of their ethical obligations from the very beginning of their careers.

It is vital that young scientists – including many of you here – understand the broader implications of your research, not only to be able to promote and implement it effectively, but to do so in a responsible way.

Certainly, the challenges ahead are manifold, and we at the OPCW are very much focused on the need to readjust our priorities.

As I have mentioned, this means gradually shifting our focus away from getting rid of existing weapons to preventing new ones from appearing – a much harder task.

Added to this is a changing strategic landscape.

Industrial globalisation, new advances in science and technology, and rapid progress in communications will all have a large impact on how we implement the Convention in years to come.

For example, new improvements in chemical production technology will lead to new possibilities for small-scale production of chemicals.

This will potentially present new verification challenges as the range of facilities capable of making and handling dual-use chemicals increases significantly.

Likewise, the growing convergence of biology and chemistry could call into question the integrity of our current monitoring mechanisms.

A far more difficult challenge – one that current global non-proliferation norms are ill-equipped for dealing with – is that posed by non-state actors.

Several terrorist groups have made clear that they are trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction – and that they would use them, if they succeeded.

In the case of chemical weapons, the dangers are very real, especially if we consider the threat posed by options for using conventional means to bring about a toxic chemical incident. The use of chlorine as a weapon in Syria is a case in point.

Amid this uncertain environment, our task must be to anticipate and address the impact that such challenges might have on our existing measurers, and to work to adapt them.

This means turning many of these challenges into opportunities, especially in relation to our interface with technology.

New technological developments can, for example, enhance methods of gathering, transmitting and retrieving data which might help with monitoring and verification.

This equally applies to new communication tools, as evidenced by the role that social media has recently played in bringing new sources of data to our attention.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

As we prepare to celebrate the centenary of the chemical attacks in Ieper, we need to draw lessons not only from the tragic legacy of chemical warfare, but also from the political will that the world has drawn in creating a global norm against these heinous weapons.

The Chemical Weapons Convention has stood the test of time in prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons.

For it to continue to do, it is vital that we use our partnerships – with policy-makers, science and students such as yourselves – to ensure the Convention's ongoing relevance as advances in science and technology shape our future.

These partnerships will remain a vital investment in the contribution made by the Convention towards enhancing global peace and security.

Our future, after all, will depend on our ability to uphold universal values as opposed to purely national interests.

It will depend on our collective ability to harness science for the benefit of humanity.

It is in this spirit, mindful of the approaching anniversary and hopeful for what we can achieve in the immediate future, that I urge each and every one of you to help us cross the finish line and consign chemical weapons to history, forever.

Thank you.