Preventing the Re-Emergence of Chemical Weapons: Lessons for Non-Proliferation

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Thank you for that kind introduction.

I am delighted by the opportunity to address you today at this seventh annual Summer Programme on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation at the Asser Institute.

You are here for a very specific purpose – to deepen your knowledge of what is being done to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Over the next few days, you will hear from a diverse range of experts and practitioners.

Just as importantly, you will interact with them on the basis of your own experience – whether as diplomats, scholars or regulatory officials.

The OPCW has worked closely with the Asser Institute in a variety of guises over the years – none more closely than the annual WMD Programme.

But this is not reason enough to enjoy the privilege of delivering the keynote address at this event.

I like to think that the OPCW has earned this privilege as a key point of reference for what can be achieved in multilateral disarmament.

Certainly, the facts speak for themselves.

Over the past two decades, our organisation has grown to encompass 192 Member States – only four short of complete universality.

And, to date, 93% of all chemical weapons declared to the OPCW have been eliminated.

This amounts to more than 65,000 metric tonnes previously held by eight of our 192 Member States – including some 1,300 tonnes declared by Syria as a result of an unprecedented mission to remove and destroy that country's chemical weapons.

Remaining stocks – held by Russia and the United States – are scheduled to be completely destroyed by 2020 and 2023, respectively.

Libya's chemical weapons were eliminated almost two years ago, and we are advancing plans to remove and destroy some leftover precursor chemicals.

We are likewise working with Iraq to scope out a destruction programme for remnants of chemical weapons in that country.

Yet, for all this, our value as a point of reference for disarmament goes well beyond our achievements in securing the destruction of chemical weapons.

The OPCW represents a comprehensive regime designed not only to rid the world of chemical weapons, but also to protect against them being built again.

As we approach the threshold of the complete elimination of declared stocks, our focus is increasingly shifting away from destroying chemical weapons to preventing their re-emergence.

This new focus goes well beyond what is traditionally understood by non-proliferation to encompass a far more holistic idea of chemical security.

It is this aspect that I wish to focus on in my remarks here today.

I will describe what the OPCW currently has in its tool kit to meet emerging challenges.

I will also brief you on what we are doing to enhance our responsiveness to new threats in a shifting security landscape.

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The bedrock of global efforts to remove the scourge of chemical weapons is the Chemical Weapons Convention.

More than twenty years since it was concluded, the Convention still stands as the most tangible disarmament dividend from the end of the Cold War.

Several other arms control accords share individual features in common with the Convention, but none have them all in such a uniquely comprehensive combination.

Most importantly in this regard, the Chemical Weapons Convention is much more than a legal norm.

For the Convention not only bans an entire class of WMD, it polices this ban through a gold-standard verification regime.

My colleagues from the OPCW will brief you on the specific features of this regime later in this programme.

But what I will say here is that the facility to monitor and inspect destruction and chemical production activities – in an impartial and credible way – has been vital for building confidence between our Member States.

I would also note that how we undertake verification must be continuously improved, if we are to stay ahead of the curve and maintain this confidence.

Legal provision for verification, effective methodology and techniques that build confidence, and political will to enforce them – these have been key contributors to our success.

All three were very much in evidence during the mission to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons programme, demonstrating just how relevant, flexible and responsive our verification mechanism can be.

Let me highlight three ways in which this mechanism, and the political will driving it, were able to render practical outcomes during the Syria mission.

First, it was clear from the outset that the prospect of eliminating weapons in Syria would be a daunting one.

Given the active conflict in that country, our Member States agreed to remove chemical weapons from Syria and to destroy them outside the country.

Technically, this was contrary to the stipulations of the Convention, which require possessor states to destroy their weapons on their own territory and at their own cost.

But, with the support of the UN Security Council, we were able to stretch the letter of the law of the Convention to better capture its spirit.

By doing so, and counting on strong in-kind and financial support of our Member States, we were able to achieve the destruction of chemical weapons declared by Syria within a year of the mission getting underway in September 2013.

Secondly, in response to the additional challenges posed by the two-stage removal and destruction mission, the OPCW was able to deploy inspectors at all points in what was a complex mission with many interlocking parts.

This included at the Syrian port of Latakia, where chemical weapons were loaded, on board the US Cape Ray, where many of them were later transloaded and destroyed, as well as various facilities in Finland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and the United States, where the remainder were destroyed.

The support of the UN Security Council was a strong vote of confidence in the probity and reach of these verification activities.

Importantly also, this support facilitated joint mission arrangements with the UN to provide vital security and logistics support for our inspectors who had to, for the first time, deploy in a conflict zone.

Thirdly, a crucial factor in the success of the Syria mission was technical innovation in coming up with destruction and verification solutions.

This ranged from seaborne destruction operations aboard the Cape Ray to remote monitoring by GPS-mounted cameras of sites in Syria to which our inspectors could not gain physical access.

All this amply demonstrates that the Convention provides a ready-made framework for inventive, practical solutions to disarmament challenges – including sometimes unexpected ones.

Yet, this mission does not represent the full extent of the OPCW's activities in relation to Syria.

In response to persistent allegations of chemical attacks in Syria, the OPCW set up a Fact-Finding Mission in April 2014.

This mission's findings – notably, that chlorine and sulphur mustard had been used as weapons in several incidents in Syria – were instrumental in galvanising international action.

At the end of last year, the UN Security Council established an independent Joint Investigative Mission mandated to identify those responsible for such attacks, with a view to eventually bringing them to justice.

An additional challenge has been to resolve gaps and inconsistencies in Syria's initial declaration.

The OPCW has fielded a Declaration Assessment Team since 2014 for this purpose, whose engagement has been instrumental in advancing resolution of this issue with Syrian authorities.

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I have highlighted our activities related to Syria for an important reason.

They have, in many ways, been emblematic of both our traditional core mission, as well as new and emerging challenges.

Our traditional mission relates to ensuring all existing stocks of chemical weapons are accounted for and destroyed.

This includes dealing with old or abandoned chemical weapons, which present potential hazards to people and the environment.

In some cases – notably, chemical weapons abandoned by Japan on Chinese territory at the end of World War II – this presents a technically complex and resource-intensive exercise.

Our traditional mission also includes persuading the four countries still outside the Convention – Egypt, Israel, North Korea and South Sudan – to join at the earliest opportunity, and subsequently dealing with any chemical weapons they may have in their possession.

Given the stigma attached to chemical weapons, no country can exercise the prerogative to flout the norms of the Convention – even if only implicitly.

Until non-Member States explicitly remove any doubts about their intentions vis-à-vis the Convention by joining it, our Member States will continue to control their access to scheduled chemicals.

As for the challenges beyond our traditional mission, these relate squarely to the ongoing threat posed by chemical weapons – in various forms.

While the threat of states using chemical weapons has been all but removed, the threat of non-state actors using such weapons has become a stark reality.

What makes the ambitions of terrorists especially invidious is the relative accessibility of the materials and technologies required for making chemical weapons.

Many of these are, in fact, freely traded because of their broad-ranging industrial applications.

Chlorine is a good example.

It is a vital chemical for sterilising hospitals and purifying water.

Yet, it can also be used as a weapon to spread terror and, in some cases, death, through choking, as we have seen in Syria and Iraq.

The accessibility of chemical weapons also extends to the possibility of terrorists attacking industrial facilities.

Imagine the impact that a conventional attack against a chemical facility could have, given the scale of damage from industrial accidents, such as the one in Tianjin just over a year ago.

Against this backdrop, one thing is clear.

Dealing with the threat of chemical terrorism will require the OPCW and its Member States to adopt a more broad-ranging approach to chemical security.

This means, first and foremost, reinforcing the extensive prohibitions of the Convention at the national level.

Each of our 192 Member States must be able to prosecute any of its nationals committing offences under the Convention – whether they act on behalf of a state or non-state entity.

This has been the focus of much recent work in the OPCW's Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism and its Sub-Working Group.

The OPCW provides an ideal global platform for benchmarking in this regard, as well as targeting training and assistance activities.

Such activities are designed to help Member States better implement the Convention – especially where such assistance is needed most.

They range from assistance in drafting implementing legislation to training courses for customs and regulatory officials for monitoring transfers of chemicals.

The OPCW is also enhancing its coordination with other international organisations in the context of the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force.

Our collective aim is to strengthen prevention and enhance capacity in preparedness and response – work which the OPCW has spearheaded with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

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In addition to the spectre of chemical terrorism, emerging challenges for how we implement the Convention are arising in the form of rapid advances in science and technology.

Scientific and technological progress is, of course, a constant.

But, with shifts in the threat environment, the discovery of new chemical substances and more efficient production technologies could present new dangers – especially alongside more opportunities for communicating them rapidly, such as via the Internet.

To guard against this, it is vital that those of us engaged in disarmament and non-proliferation draw on the widest possible sources of knowledge and expertise.

The OPCW has a long history of close collaboration with science and industry to this end – and for good reason.

Scientists and industry representatives participated actively in the negotiations that rendered the Chemical Weapons Convention and its robust verification regime.

And we continue to consult to safeguard the effectiveness of this regime, as well as to monitor developments that might require us to revise and adapt it.

As a source of independent expert advice from across the globe, the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board has laid out some important groundwork in this respect.

This includes considering the implications of growing convergence between the chemical and biological sciences for implementation of the Convention, as well as scoping out options for enhancing verification techniques.

We have also established consultative mechanisms with industry associations to look at how we can expand our cooperation beyond compliance with the Convention to enhancing chemical safety and security across the globe.

This is clearly in the interests of business no less than governments.

We even saw in the case of the Syria mission how the private sector can play an active role in some core activities.

In the wake of a tender process, two companies – a Finnish one and a US one – were selected to dispose of some of the chemicals declared by Syria.

In doing so, they set an encouraging precedent for engaging commercial structures in achieving disarmament objectives.

At the same time, we are looking further afield to create opportunities out of challenges in relation to preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

This has meant supplementing traditional hard-power disarmament and non-proliferation measures – such as destruction of weapons, verification and monitoring – with new soft-power initiatives.

These have centred in the first instance on expanding our community of stakeholders.

The OPCW recently established an Advisory Board on Education and Outreach to develop new engagement strategies and tools to widen our reach among chemistry professionals, within academia, in civil society, in schools, and amid the general public.

A good example have been The Hague Guidelines, developed by chemistry professionals from across the globe under OPCW auspices.

These guidelines provide elements for a code of ethics encouraging a culture of responsible science in science, industry and research.

Alongside our programmes for expanding technical cooperation on peaceful uses of chemistry, we consider such initiatives as important investments in making chemical weapons unwanted.

For, as I hope has been clear from my remarks, preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons is a far broader challenge than has traditionally been associated with non-proliferation.

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Let me conclude where I started.

Chemical disarmament has been a well-recognised success story.

But this success story is not the complete story of global chemical disarmament – far from it.

To make our disarmament gains permanent and to invest in practical ways in preventing future proliferation, we need to develop, and to realise, a more holistic approach to global chemical security.

Now, at the threshold of the complete destruction of all declared chemical weapons, the OPCW is in the midst of addressing this challenge.

We have framed our approach in an overarching vision paper of where we need to be by 2025, supplemented with an ongoing process of medium-term planning.

This is by no means intended to be a prescriptive, in-house-only exercise.

For, to succeed, we will need to incorporate views and solutions offered by all of our stakeholders.

And we will need to encompass a broader reach that, ultimately, creates more visibility and accountability for the life cycle of chemicals, from production to end-use.

This is the sort of practical vision we need to aspire to, if chemical weapons are truly to become a thing of the past.

Thank you for your attention.