



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Statement by the Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü To the Executive Council at its 55th Meeting

Wednesday, 5 July 2017

REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Mr Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

I welcome you all to the Fifty fifth meeting of the Council which is convened to consider the Reports of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission regarding the incidents in Um-Housh in September 2016 and in Khan Shaykhun in early April this year.

Based on the interviews carried out, the documents reviewed, and the results of blood sample analyses, the FFM has confirmed that two female casualties reported to have been involved in the incident in Um-Housh, Aleppo on 16 September 2016 were exposed to sulfur mustard.

The FFM also conducted an examination and analysis of an unexploded mortar handed over by the experts of the Russian Federation's CBRN Team to the Syrian authorities. This item which was reported to be connected to the incident in Um-Housh was a munition containing sulfur mustard.

The FFM's report is reflective of work that has been extensive and thorough using validated methodologies and complying with OPCW guidelines and procedures for the conduct of an investigation of alleged use of chemical weapons as applicable to the particular conditions and circumstances of Syria. These procedures are also consistent with the time tested and internationally recognized methods of fact finding investigations.

The same methodology has led to previous confirmations by the FFM as well as the conclusion in the latest report that sarin has been used as a weapon in Khan Shaykhun.

As regards to this incident, the Secretariat has kept States Parties informed about the progress of FFM's enquiry which was initiated immediately upon receipt of reports that gave rise to credible concerns that it could be a chemical weapons use.

Apart from my statements before the Council on 13 April and 19 April, the Secretariat's note S/1497/2017 provided an update to States Parties on the activities of the FFM which continued its work involving interviews, evidence management and sample acquisition.

The Report of the FFM issued on 29 June provides the necessary details of the investigation and conclusions.

The FFM relied on interviews, samples made available by interviewees and the Syrian Arab Republic; medical records; and biomedical specimens, both those for which the team had full chain of custody and those taken by others. The relatively large number of witnesses has enhanced the corroborative value of different testimonies and provided a means of cross-checking the evidence provided. This corroboration imparts greater confidence in the conclusions that have been reached.

The Syrian Arab Republic had advised that there were 10 potential witnesses to be interviewed in Damascus. However, only 2 individuals were available and their testimonies are included in the report.

Samples offered by the Syrian Arab Republic were accepted by the FFM together with a video recording made at the time of the collection of these samples. These environmental samples consisted of soil, fragments of metal, bone, and vegetation from different locations, as well as extraction samples from these fragments collected from the crater on the road. An analysis of these samples was performed by the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) in Barzah, and the results were provided to the FFM.

Materials accepted from the Syrian Arab Republic were on the understanding that the government was confident of their authenticity. The results of analyses as performed by the SSRC in Barzah and by the OPCW Laboratory on the samples provided by Syria turned out to be consistent with the results of the analyses carried out by our designated laboratories on the other samples received by the FFM.

When all the evidence and information from all available sources is put together, there is no disagreement that Sarin was used as a chemical weapon in Khan Shaykhun. This naturally impacted my decision regarding a possible on-site visit to Khan Shaykhun. The mandate of the FFM is confined to determining whether or not use of chemical weapons has occurred. In this case, once that positive determination was made, including the same assertion by the Syrian Arab Republic, a site visit lost its relevance in so far as the work of the FFM is concerned.

As I have pointed out earlier, we simply cannot ignore the fact that a site visit is a high security risk under the current situation in Syria. Despite all the preparations the precautions and adherence to security procedures and protocols, in May 2014 the FFM came under a serious armed attack from unknown assailants.

Only the most compelling reasons could justify taking that risk again. In the present instance the basic objective of FFM's mission has already been fulfilled. Considering that the security risks associated with a deployment to Khan Shaykhun far outweighed any additional corroboration of the established facts, I decided against the FFM undertaking a site visit to Khan Shaykhun. I should like to underline that at that stage, the FFM was already in Damascus and in a state of readiness to conduct an on-site visit.

I commend the commitment and dedication of the OPCW staff who have volunteered to work with the FFM under the most challenging conditions. I also commend the work of the UN negotiator who was working with us to try to ensure safe access to the site. This is work carried out with the highest standards of professionalism and impartiality and needs to be recognised for the contribution it makes in the cause of protecting the abiding norms of the Convention.

The continuing use of chemical weapons in Syria poses a serious challenge to the international

community. Our organisation not only has the mandate but an absolute responsibility to investigate and to uncover the facts.

I have strongly condemned this atrocity that reportedly killed approximately 100 people, including children, and injured hundreds of others. It is a blatant violation of the norms of the Convention.

The work of the Joint Investigative Mechanism has become highly important in identifying the perpetrators of this attack. They must be held accountable for their actions. And, I call on all States Parties with relevant information related to this incident to work with and support the JIM.

I thank you for your attention.

Mr Chairperson, if you allow me I should turn to my colleagues to provide a briefing.
