



Embassy of Australia, The Hague

**Statement of H.E. Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus
Permanent Representative of Australia to the OPCW
Fourth Review Conference of the Chemical Weapons Convention**

Mr Chair,

May I join others in congratulating you on your election as Chair of this Review Conference. On behalf of Australia, I pledge my delegation's support for a successful outcome. I would also like to thank Ambassador Puja for his chairing of the Open-Ended Working Group to prepare us for this Conference and Ambassadors Nolke and Koloane for their co-Chairing of the Open-Ended Working Group on Future Priorities and recommendations for the Review Conference. We also congratulate Director-General Arias on his election and look forward to his wise leadership over the coming years.

Mr Chair, in 1997 we – the countries in this room – put aside our political differences to bring into force one of the most successful disarmament treaties against weapons of mass destruction – the Chemical Weapons Convention, supported by one of the most effective support structures, the OPCW.

We should be proud of what we have achieved over the past 20 years: near universal membership; the verified destruction of 96 per cent of the world's declared stockpiles of chemical weapons; more than 3,500 inspections conducted under Article VI of the Convention; and the entrenchment of a global norm against any use of chemical weapons.

But the world is not static. Over the past five years scientific, technological and geopolitical developments have challenged implementation of the Convention. It is important that we acknowledge these developments, and crucial that we respond effectively. This Conference must provide concrete guidance to take forward the primary object and purpose of the Convention for the next five years and uphold a vital global norm.

This Fourth Review Conference comes at a critical time in the history of the Convention. We have seen the repeated confirmed use of chemical weapons by the Syrian military forces since 2012. We have seen nerve agent attacks in Malaysia and the United Kingdom. We have also seen Da'esh use chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq. These attacks are abhorrent and violate international law. It is important to keep in mind that none of us is immune.

Australia condemns the repeated use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war, which has killed and inflicted enormous suffering on large numbers of innocent men, women and children. The Syrian regime must fully adhere to its commitments under this Convention, including declaring all of its chemical weapons stockpiles and facilities allowing for their full dismantlement and destruction.

Australia was proud to support the decision adopted at the Special Session of the Conference of States Parties in June authorising the OPCW to put in place arrangements to impartially and independently identify users of chemical weapons in Syria.

Australia welcomes the early establishment of this capability given the absence of an attribution mechanism on Syria since the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism ended in November 2017, the extension of which was vetoed, most disappointingly, in the UN Security Council.

It is of course appropriate, that the UN Security Council should be the body with primary mandate and responsibility for imposing consequences on those who undermine international peace and security.

But it is also absolutely appropriate that the OPCW, as the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention to which we have all subscribed, be able to undertake independent investigations in order to identify those who violate the Convention, anywhere. That should be a fundamental rationale for us all.

Australia looks forward to continuing to work with the Secretariat as implementation of the Syria attribution mechanism continues. And we support the recommendations by the Director-General to establish a broader attribution mechanism. We call on all States Parties to support the OPCW in these endeavours.

Adequate funding should be provided to the OPCW so that it is able to carry out its important role. Not to do so would be a hollow, cynical step undermining the primary rationale for all our work. We note the overwhelming support in favour of the budget at the CSP this week, and commend those delegations who stood up for the OPCW and its important work, including on attribution.

Mr Chair, we are pleased that we are moving closer to the goal of universality. Australia calls upon the four States remaining outside the Convention to ratify or accede as a matter of urgency – noting the many positive security, economic and technological benefits that membership brings.

While universality is important, its value will not be truly realised if States Parties do not fully implement their obligations under the Convention, including putting in place the necessary domestic legislative frameworks. National implementing legislation covering all key areas of the Convention also helps prevent non-State actors from acquiring chemical weapons. Toward this end, Australia is continuing its efforts to promote effective and comprehensive implementation of the Convention, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Together with the OPCW, we were proud to host a National Capacity Evaluation and Training Workshop for Pacific Island Countries in May 2014 and more recently, in 2017, the first OPCW Analytical Skills Development Course in the Southern Hemisphere, which trained chemists from the Indo-Pacific in the analysis of chemical warfare agents.

Mr Chair, with destruction of chemical stockpiles near complete, we must maintain focus on non-proliferation, including through a robust industry inspection regime. This work is also important for helping prevent the use of chemical weapons.

Maintaining the prohibition against the use of chemical weapons is also dependent on the retention of expertise and the preservation of a skilled workforce. The OPCW must be allowed to adopt a more flexible tenure policy, having due regard to geographic and gender balance. We encourage States Parties to give the Director General and Technical Secretariat the tools they need to ensure the continuity of knowledge and expertise within the OPCW.

Australia supports strengthening the OPCW and its bodies, including capacity building to help countries prevent the spread and use of chemical weapons. We encourage the continued support from the Technical Secretariat to help States Parties fully meet their obligations under the Convention. And we must continue our work to prevent the acquisition of toxic chemicals by non-State actors.

Mr Chair, the Review Conference is an opportunity for us to look to the future and to ask what we can do to ensure the OPCW has a clear mandate to carry out the work necessary to prevent any further use of chemical weapons.

One of the challenges our organisation faces is keeping pace with emerging or new chemicals that can be used for hostile purposes.

It is for this reason that Australia supports the recommendation to launch discussions on central nervous system-acting chemicals within the policy making organs of the OPCW.

Our concern, as many of my colleagues will know, relates to the use of aerosolised central nervous system-acting chemicals in law enforcement. Dispersal of these chemicals through the air, across a wide area, risks causing death or serious injury to those exposed, as it is impossible to control the dose received by each individual. I encourage other States Parties to join the growing number of voices calling for open, inclusive discussions on this important subject, and thank Switzerland in particular for its work on this issue.

Australia acknowledges the important role of the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) and associated temporary working groups in helping the OPCW address the advances in science and technology relevant to the Convention. We should continue to strengthen the OPCW and States Parties' ability to better monitor and use science and technology, especially in relation to appropriate implementation of SAB recommendations.

Australia also supports the continuation of the good work of the OPCW's Advisory Board on Education and Outreach to thereby assist States Parties in promoting greater appreciation of the purpose of the Convention and the important role played by academics, laboratories and industry in achieving its goals.

Mr Chair, we must all of us here today reaffirm our commitment to upholding the global prohibition against any use of chemical weapons and pledge our firm, unequivocal and practical support for the OPCW in its work to help prevent chemical weapons use.

Thank you Mr Chair, colleagues.