

SPEECH BY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS STEF BLOK ON THE OCCASION OF THE FOURTH REVIEW CONFERENCE (CHEMICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION)

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is not a conference about climate change, but I think we can say this: the OPCW has been hit by stormy weather.

Today, a hundred years after the end of the First World War – a conflict in which chemical weapons were used on a large scale – we, the member states, are called upon to help the OPCW weather this storm.

I'm certain that we can, if we are willing to do two things:

1. fight impunity by enforcing the prohibition norm; and
2. stand firm in our support for the authority, neutrality and independence of the organisation and its Director-General.

Allow me to briefly address both of these points.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We all know, that a legal norm will be ineffective if we fail to uphold it.

This is true for any norm – in national legislation, in international law and even in everyday life.

It is no less true for the norm that was codified in 1993 by the Chemical Weapons Convention. A norm that remained undisputed for many years, and has come to be regarded as universal.

Only four countries are missing from the list of member states.

But today, this norm has come under increasing pressure. By recent use of chemical weapons. In Khan Shaykhun, Syria. In Malaysia. In Salisbury in the United Kingdom.

An even greater threat than the actual use of chemical weapons, is this: the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators.

We must resist and combat this impunity. As I said during the Special Session on this topic earlier this year: if we fail to do so, we will allow perpetrators to consider themselves untouchable. As a consequence, we will be guilty of allowing the norm to gradually erode.

That's why I'm pleased with the decision adopted by the Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties, to establish an attribution mechanism at the OPCW. I know: not everyone agreed with that decision. But if the UN Security Council blocks efforts to end impunity, we have to explore other avenues.

Now it's time to take the next step: the Director-General must be given the tools with which to carry out this legitimate decision.

My country has expressed its support for the Director-General and the Technical Secretariat many times. In my view, they fulfil their tasks exceptionally well: independently, impartially and on the basis of facts.

Impartiality and reliance on facts are essential. This approach is the reason the organisation has been so successful over the years, overseeing the verification of declared stockpiles. A task that is nearly completed, now that 96% of the world's declared chemical weapons stockpiles have been destroyed. That's a significant result.

Going forward, the organisation will need to shift its focus from destroying stockpiles to preventing proliferation. For that, we need effective border control in the member states, rigorous import and export control regimes, and law enforcement with the capability to detect illegal trade. And industrial verification will remain a cornerstone of the OPCW's remit.

So, there's plenty of work to be done. Important work that won't always be easy. Work that deserves the support of all the member states. And that support should be given generously, especially now that the prohibition norm has been put to the test by recent events.

The Netherlands will continue to lend its full support to the OPCW and the Director-General. As a member state and host country, we're staying the course we embarked on long ago. In this regard, I'm pleased that we've been able to pledge 2.3 million euros to the OPCW for the purchase of land for the new laboratory. I'm certain that an upgraded lab will benefit us all.

Fortunately, we're not alone in our support for the OPCW. Many other countries have shown great generosity.

Let's pledge to answer the Director-General's call for everyone to continue contributing to the organisation in future, each according to their means.

For us, this is what this Review Conference is about. It's a conference that not only looks back at the past five years, but more importantly looks forward to the work ahead.

Five new years bringing us new opportunities to stand in support of an effective, impartial and authoritative OPCW, enabling it to continue its important work.

Let's seize this chance.

By fighting impunity and enforcing the norm.

And by supporting the Director-General and the Technical Secretariat in their work.

So that, together, we can help the OPCW weather the storm.

Thank you.

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