



**OPCW**

**Review Conference**

Fourth Session  
21 – 30 November 2018

RC-4/NAT.21  
23 November 2018  
ENGLISH only

**INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS**

**STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS AT THE  
FOURTH SPECIAL SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE STATES PARTIES TO  
REVIEW THE OPERATION OF THE CHEMICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is pleased to have this opportunity to address the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (hereinafter “the Convention”) at this Fourth Review Conference.

The past five years have seen significant progress by the States Parties and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and the ICRC applauds the fact that 96% of declared chemical weapons stockpiles have now been destroyed.

The use of poison as a means of warfare and of chemical weapons—whether nerve agents, mustard gas, chlorine or any other toxic chemical—is absolutely prohibited by this Convention and by customary international humanitarian law, which is binding on all parties to all armed conflicts. The ICRC unequivocally condemns the use of chemical weapons as an affront to our common humanity and an attack on the rule of law. It appeals to all parties to armed conflicts and to all States Parties to the Convention to uphold this prohibition, and to put an end to the use of these horrific weapons, and to the suffering they cause.

Although the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons has been upheld in the vast majority of armed conflicts since the Convention entered into force, it is at risk of being undermined by recent instances of use. It is of grave concern that, despite the obligation of all States Parties to “exclude completely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons”, and the attention given to preventing their re-emergence, chemical weapons have been used for six consecutive years in Syria. Chemical attacks have also been witnessed in Iraq, where only last year an ICRC team treated victims of blister agents. In addition, nerve agents have been used to poison individuals in isolated incidents in Europe and Asia.

The ICRC is also concerned about the misuse of common toxic industrial chemicals as chemical weapons, given that the materials are easy to obtain and hard to control. Moreover, if these chemicals are misused, it may then become difficult for civilians or humanitarians to use them for legitimate purposes. For instance, using chlorine as a chemical weapon could later hamper its crucial, beneficial and peaceful use in purifying drinking water.

States Parties must devote more attention to increasing their respective response capacity. They have both the responsibility to bolster their civilian response capacity and the right to request and receive assistance from other States Parties if chemical weapons are used. In this regard, the ICRC welcomes the long-standing efforts of governments and international



organisations, such as the OPCW and the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence, to provide international and regional assistance, and to carry out protection training courses and capacity-building activities.

Since 2010, the ICRC has taken a risk-management approach to its operations in order to ensure the safety and security of its staff who might be exposed to the risks of chemical weapons, ensure safe continuity in its humanitarian operations, and provide assistance to victims where circumstances allow. To that end, the ICRC provides high-quality training for its responders and roster members, in collaboration with partners such as the Irish Defence Forces and the Spiez Laboratory, part of the Swiss Federal Office for Civil Protection.

The ICRC's response capacity is currently focused on, among other aspects, preventing and protecting medical centres from secondary contamination by toxic chemicals. For instance, following an incident in Mosul in 2017, ICRC teams provided medical staff at a number of hospitals in the area with training and equipment for decontaminating and treating patients exposed to chemical agents.

Faced with complex operational environments such as those of chemical attacks, the ICRC's humanitarian response at all times remains grounded in its *modus operandi* of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action. Firm adherence to these principles underpins the ICRC's acceptance by parties to armed conflicts and ensures its access to victims. In keeping with these principles, the ICRC does not get involved in investigations of reported cases of chemical-weapon use, which is the responsibility of the competent authorities.

Despite the necessary focus on preventing the further use of chemical weapons, and improving the capacity to assist victims in the event of their use, it is important that States Parties also address other developments that have serious implications for the Convention.

At the First Review Conference in 2003 the ICRC expressed its alarm about the interest shown by police, security and armed forces in using certain highly toxic chemicals as weapons – so-called “incapacitating chemical agents” or “central nervous system (CNS)-acting chemicals”. The ICRC is of the view that the use of toxic chemicals as weapons for law-enforcement purposes should be limited to riot control agents only, and continues to call on each State Party to join those that have already adopted national policies and legislation to that effect.

The ICRC welcomes the progress that has been made on this issue, as evidenced by the joint statement to the Conference of the States Parties in 2017 by a group of 39 States (C-22/NAT.5), and the report of the Open-Ended Working Group on the Future Priorities of the OPCW submitted to this Conference (RC-4/WP.1). The report recognises that the use of highly toxic chemicals as weapons for law enforcement would “undermine the object and purpose of the Convention” and pose serious risks to life and health. It recommends that the OPCW's policy-making organs now address these concerns. The ICRC's position is clear: poisoning is not a legitimate means of warfare; it cannot be a legitimate means of law enforcement.

The ICRC welcomes Palestine as the newest State Party to the Convention, joining Angola, Myanmar, Somalia and Syria as new members since the Third Review Conference in 2013, and urges the four States yet to join-Egypt, Israel, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and South Sudan- to ratify or accede without delay. There can be no justification for

remaining outside the Convention, which embodies the comprehensive prohibition of chemical weapons in all circumstances.

In closing, the ICRC calls on all delegations to reaffirm their commitment to the Convention, their obligation to uphold the absolute prohibition of chemical weapons in all circumstances, and their promise to do everything in their power to protect humanity from chemical warfare.

Thank you.

--- 0 ---