



Speech by the Director-General of the OPCW, Fernando Arias, at the Center for the Promotion of Disarmament and Non-proliferation (CPDNP), “The Chemical Weapons Convention in 2019: Building on past successes and to address current challenges”

As delivered on 21 June 2019, Tokyo, Japan

Dear President Ms. Sasae,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to thank you for inviting me to be here today.

I am very pleased to be given the opportunity. The Centre’s dedication to the promotion of disarmament and non-proliferation is exactly what we seek as a translation of our work at the OPCW.

These commitments are essential for global peace and security.

I will attempt to describe to you the contribution that the global ban on chemical weapons has made to this endeavour. This is an undertaking in which we have registered exceptional successes, even as we are aware of a number of challenges ahead.

The Chemical Weapons Convention does not exist in a vacuum. It is related to how we think about security. The aspiration for eliminating this particular threat of mass destruction is part of the larger hopes for a better and safer world.

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The last century witnessed two devastating wars. That experience catalysed the search for an abiding framework of peace. The United Nations was the result.

The aspiration of humankind for abiding peace finds full expression in the words of the UN Charter.

You would also recall that the very first resolution of the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 called for ‘the elimination of atomic weapons and all other major weapons of mass destruction’.

This resolution was not accidental. It recognised a new reality in our world. The dawn of the age of advanced science had also marked the start of the prospect of mass destruction.

Japan experienced the most horrific of these tragedies in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan’s advocacy of disarmament and non-proliferation signifies this deeply felt anguish. It acquires a strong moral force, for which we are all grateful.

Initiatives such as the 1946 resolution represented the international community's will to avoid further warfare and bloodshed. It expressed the common will to constrain humanity from a path that could lead to its own ruin.

The debilitating effects of the Cold War hampered progress. Its end revived hopes and disarmament once again returned on the international agenda. At present, we might be witnessing another shift driven by relentless developments in the fields of science, technology and business.

We know that our world has become a much smaller place. This brings unprecedented opportunities for progress, provided that we can hold firmly to the framework of agreed international norms and values.

The fundamental architecture for security is in place. It affords us the space in which we can concert our efforts to deal with global challenges.

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International law as regards disarmament and non-proliferation has made significant progress.

The most comprehensive treaty is the Chemical Weapons Convention. The Convention and its implementing body, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (the OPCW), have now been in operation for over two decades.

Achievements often follow tragedies and trials. The history of the Convention is no different. It is worth recalling. We can then appreciate the importance of what we have and what it can yet accomplish.

Customary international law has always regarded the use of poison in warfare as reprehensible. The St. Petersburg Declaration of 1868 and The Hague Declaration of 1899 sought to rein in the negative potential of the industrial age and advancing science. These were not successful.

The use of chemical weapons during the First World War claimed 1.3 million casualties, with 100,000 deaths.

Subsequent attempts to prevent further use fell equally short of achieving the ultimate objective of completely eliminating chemical weapons. For instance, the major drawback of the 1925 Geneva Protocol was that, while it prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons, it did not prevent States from producing or stockpiling them. As a hedge against possible use by others, several countries continued to amass huge quantities of chemical weapons.

Despite the provisions of international law, there have been cases of use in regional conflicts, throughout the last century, and even in the present one. Chemical weapons have also been used to directly attack civilian populations and as instruments of terror.

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Historical lessons and contemporary threats confirm the necessity of strengthening the Chemical Weapons Convention. It is the first multilateral treaty to ban an entire class of weapons of mass destruction with the application of verification.

And it is within this legal framework that we will be able to make the world safe from chemical weapons.

The ban on those weapons under the Convention is absolute and total. It creates no exemptions, no exceptions. In the world of today, there can be no development, production, stockpiling, transfer, retention and use of chemical weapons.

Provisions on verification are designed to ensure compliance, to build confidence and to deter violations.

The Convention is not a treaty that only looks good on paper. It is an example of how we can actually think about our collective security and take substantive and quantifiable steps towards defined goals.

The total quantity of chemical warfare agents declared to the OPCW amounts to over 71,000 tonnes. Over 97% of these weapons have already been destroyed under verification by the OPCW.

This is no ordinary achievement, considering the nature of those killer agents. These were large quantities of extremely toxic substances that are expensive to produce and far more expensive to destroy.

Of the two largest possessor States, Russia has completed the elimination of its chemical weapons. The United States remains on track and is expected to complete the destruction of its stockpile by 2023.

While the destruction campaign is nearing completion, the non-proliferation aspects are still a challenge. This is a multi-faceted undertaking.

This is also where we will continue to invest most of our future energies and resources. The objective is to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons and to preclude their use under any circumstances.

The main but not the only tool is industry verification. All member countries with a relevant chemical industry must allow inspections by the OPCW.

The purpose of these inspections is to verify that the production or consumption of relevant chemicals and precursors is only for legitimate activities.

With over 3,500 such inspections conducted since its inception, the Organisation has accumulated a wealth of experience and expertise that can serve future ends.

Multilateral disarmament is sometimes affected by tensions between non-proliferation objectives and promotional activities. At the OPCW, we implement and promote a balanced approach.

Our international cooperation activities have promoted goodwill across our membership. Such a positive spirit is crucial in maintaining a constructive environment for progress.

Countries joining the Convention are also assured of every possible support in situations in which they might become victims of a chemical weapons attack.

As part of such preparedness, a Rapid Response and Assistance Mission can be deployed upon possible requests from our members.

The Mission is designed for emergency measures of assistance in the case of use of chemical weapons.

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But the existence of law itself does not guarantee its non-violation. While our progress in abolishing chemical weapons is unprecedented, these weapons have again been used recently.

In August of 2013, a densely populated suburb of Damascus called Ghouta was attacked with the deadly nerve agent sarin. About 1,400 innocent people were brutally killed.

This outrageous incident triggered an international crisis. A series of events unfolded, culminating in Syria's accession to the Convention. A possible international armed conflict was averted.

This was the result of an agreement between the Russian Federation and the United States of America, signed in Geneva. We must hope that the two countries will be able to restore their cooperation, for it remains critical in resolving issues that we currently face.

On 27 September 2013, the OPCW Executive Council adopted a decision on the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme. This decision was endorsed on the same day by United Nations Security Council resolution.

An accelerated programme of destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons programme was established by the Executive Council. The task had to be carried out in a war setting.

It is important to note that neither precedent nor experience for this kind of work was available. Nor was such an undertaking foreseen in the Convention. It goes to show that with political will, and an appropriate level of support, the Organisation is capable of dealing with extra-ordinary situations.

Within a time frame never before attempted, the Organisation operated in an active war zone to oversee the destruction of a major chemical weapons programme. An OPCW-UN Joint Mission was set-up for the purpose.

Within a month's time, a number of tasks were completed. Syria was provided with assistance in compiling and submitting a declaration of its chemical weapons programme.

Chemical weapons production and storage sites were identified. Production capacity was rendered unusable.

With the support of more than 30 of our Member States, given the particular situation of Syria, the bulk of the declared chemical weapons stockpile was removed from Syria and destroyed outside its territory.

A specially equipped American naval vessel, MV Cape Ray, was utilised to neutralise on board, at sea, the most dangerous chemicals. The destruction of declared chemicals removed from Syria occurred at commercial chemical disposal facilities located in Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The conflict in Syria has been tragic. The part of the system of collective security that was allowed to function in Syria produced its results. Unfortunately, after the success of the disarmament mission, we encountered further challenges.

In the face of persistent and credible allegations that chlorine had been used in Syria as a chemical weapon, a Fact-Finding Mission was established in April 2014. Since that time, numerous deployments have taken place and incidents examined. In a number of cases the results have confirmed, with a high level of confidence, the use of toxic chemicals as weapons.

Faced with such a grave breach of norms, Member States agreed that it was important to identify the perpetrators. For this purpose, the UN Security Council established, in August 2015, an OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (the “JIM”).

This mechanism established in several cases the responsibility for the use of chemical weapons. State-level elements were identified. The JIM also confirmed that the terrorist group that calls itself the Islamic State had used chemical weapons.

However, the Security Council was unable to renew the mandate of the JIM in November 2017. The lack of agreement is unfortunate. It can only be to the detriment of the international community.

Attacks involving chemical weapons also occurred at Kuala Lumpur airport in Malaysia in 2017 and in Salisbury in the United Kingdom in 2018. They point to a new dimension of threat.

In June last year, the Conference of the 193 States Parties of the OPCW decided to broaden the responsibilities of the Organisation. The Organisation is now tasked with including in the results of its investigations information that would point to the perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

To that effect, an Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) has been set up. The team is now complete. It has already commenced its activities. The decision also enables the Organisation to assist, upon request, States Parties in their investigations into the use of chemical weapons should this happen in their own territories.

The OPCW has been exemplary in offering its States Parties the highest value for money.

We have operated on budgets that can be regarded as modest by the standards operating in other intergovernmental organisations. With heightened expectations, it is natural to underscore the importance of augmenting our resources, both human and financial.

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Progress in getting rid of declared stockpiles is not in itself a guarantee against the re-emergence of chemical weapons. What we can do is to continually and consciously make the Convention stronger.

Our work is far from over. Given the new realities, it has just begun. We now need to fully focus on both prohibition and prevention. Our mandate at the OPCW is to implement the prohibition on chemical weapons and to facilitate prevention.

This is to be promoted through cooperation and coordination with a range of actors, including States Parties, relevant intergovernmental bodies, and civil society, by focusing on the following priority areas:

Firstly, the Convention has been legally accepted by every country in the world save four. This prevents its complete universalisation and gives cause for concern. We must continue to urge Egypt, Israel, South Sudan and North Korea to join the Convention at the earliest opportunity.

Secondly, in terms of keeping our verification regime sound and relevant, aspects of science and technology and the functioning of modern chemical industry have acquired relevance. The chemical industry makes an important contribution to economic growth and has a major share in the global output. Most advanced chemical enterprises are known for their programmes of self-regulation. They are also subject to rigorous national audits.

From the perspective of the Convention, there remains a need for vigilance. Rapid advances in science and technology are constantly changing the face of the industry.

The verification regime of the Convention has so far served its purpose well. Two conditions are necessary in order to maintain this level of confidence. One relates to the ability of the Organisation to detect new chemicals and establish whether they are relevant to the Convention. For example, it is important to acquire a deeper understanding of the growing interactions between chemistry and biology and the emerging ability to produce potentially dangerous chemicals through new techniques and methods.

The highly toxic nerve agent used in the Salisbury attacks might once have been considered the stuff of science fiction. Unfortunately, it is science fact. This chemical fell outside the purview of the OPCW verification regime. The Conference of the States Parties this November has to decide on how to address this situation.

Science can also be harnessed to improve our verification methods and to enable us to better respond to chemical incidents. Effective tools of detection and mitigation can deter violators and terrorists.

In order to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons, the verification regime must keep pace with the growing number of chemical facilities and capabilities. At the time the Convention was negotiated, this number was comparatively small. We also need to keep a close watch on the impact of emerging technologies.

The OPCW Scientific Advisory Board, comprising eminent experts from different States Parties, helps us to keep abreast of new discoveries in science and technology and their impact on the Convention.

A new project will further augment our ability to know more and to serve better. The OPCW Chemical Laboratory is being upgraded to an OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology. It will be housed in a new facility, to be constructed through voluntary contributions from States Parties.

We are all aware of the need for the best skills, training and analytical abilities to keep pace with the rapid advances in the field. Member States also stand to benefit from the capacity building and research opportunities that the Centre will sponsor.

The objective of prevention also has to take into account the growing number of industrial chemical facilities in the world.

The Convention has a sound legal framework. Effective enforcement of this framework would serve to criminalise the development, production, stockpiling and transfer of chemical weapons or their use by all natural or legal persons under the jurisdiction of individual States Parties.

Full and effective implementation of the Convention by our Member States and greater controls over substances of concern make the best prescription to prevent acts of chemical terrorism.

On its part, the Organisation continues to refine its approach as a forum contributing to global anti-terrorism efforts. We also have ongoing cooperation with a number of relevant international bodies.

A comprehensive legal framework, through national legislation and the means to enforce it, such as police, judges, and customs officials, creates the domestic capacity to monitor, to report, and to guide activities involving chemicals. The OPCW Secretariat assists our States Parties in this important area through training programmes, information-sharing and capacity-building activities.

To summarise, the OPCW has been called upon to carry out some extraordinary missions. It has done this so effectively that in 2013 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the OPCW.

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The OPCW has set an example of implementing an international treaty covering a sensitive area. Despite the complexity encountered and challenges faced, a lot has been accomplished over the past 22 years, but the task is far from being finished.

It is essential to remain steadfast and to endow the Organisation with the support and resources needed.

The Convention and the OPCW are essential to our aspirations for international peace and security. That is why we must work together towards preserving both the norm and the institution, as well as the legacy we have inherited.

Thank you
