



STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR MATTHEW NEUHAUS, PERMANENT
REPRESENTATIVE OF AUSTRALIA TO THE OPCW
AT THE NINETY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Australia is delighted to again be taking up a seat on the Executive Council after a period of two years. It is a sign of our strong and ongoing commitment to the OPCW. I look forward to working closely with our Chair, Ambassador Gomez, my fellow Council Members, and with all States Parties, as we continue to address the challenges of the 21st century and strive towards our shared commitment to a world free of chemical weapons.

Australia takes up its seat on the Council with a strong sense of the crucial importance of the issues before us. We are appalled that chemical weapons have been used in recent times. This is unacceptable. At the same time, we are heartened by the response of States Parties who, in June 2018, took action to ensure that the perpetrators of chemical weapons will not go unaccounted for.

Australia supported the June decision, and the subsequent establishment of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) because we firmly believe we cannot look away when fundamental rules and norms of the international community are breached. Australia's position is clear: the use of chemical warfare agents or toxic chemicals as weapons – anywhere, by anyone, and under any circumstances – is prohibited, reprehensible, unjustified, and cannot be tolerated. Those who use, enable, shield or order the use of chemical weapons must be identified and brought to account.

Australia welcomes the release of the IIT's first report under its mandate of investigating and attributing responsibility for the reported use of chemical weapons in Syria. We commend the IIT for its rigorous, impartial and independent analysis.

The conclusion of the IIT report confirms that the Syrian Arab Republic is in breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention. Syria is a State Party to the Convention, and its military forces have been identified as using chemical weapons. The actions by the Syrian regime represent a grave and serious violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The Syrian regime's ongoing failure to fully declare its chemical weapons program, as noted in the IIT report, is yet another violation of the Convention. Syria must fully comply with its obligations and ensure the complete dismantling and destruction of its chemical weapons program.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is clear – if doubts or concerns regarding compliance with the Convention arise, the Executive Council shall consult with the State Party involved and request the State Party to take measures to redress the situation. It is the responsibility of all of us, as members of the Executive Council, to take action in response to Syria's non-compliance with the Convention.

On a more positive note, I am proud to announce Australia's contribution of AUD 200,000 towards the future OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology. The Centre will provide opportunities for experts from all over the world to further enhance their technical capabilities. It will ensure that the OPCW remains at the forefront of being able to respond to chemical weapons issues long into the future.

We note that on 7 June 2020, the amendments to Schedule 1 of the CWC Annex on Chemicals officially entered into force. This update recognises the ongoing relevance and importance of the OPCW in addressing current and future threats of chemical weapons use.

This session of the Council is taking place under unprecedented circumstances. The disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have had an immense impact on the way we work. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the Technical Secretariat to overcome the technical and logistical challenges. In particular, we appreciate the engagement with our National Authority regarding planning for future inspections.

The past months have highlighted the importance of modern IT capabilities and support, including for virtual meetings and facilitations. We encourage the Technical Secretariat to continue to review its IT infrastructure to ensure it is fit for purpose into the future.

At the Executive Council meeting in March, I was honoured to be appointed, together with Ambassador Dupuy Lasserre of Uruguay, as a co-facilitator of the facilitation on organisational governance issues. I look forward to progressing this work over the coming months. The need for organisational flexibility has been highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis. It is the responsibility of States Parties to work with the Technical Secretariat to ensure that it is equipped with the tools, and the flexibility, to carry out the work we ask of it.

I would like to conclude with a few comments regarding the draft decision that sets out our understanding regarding the aerosolised use of central nervous system acting chemicals (CNSACs) for law enforcement purposes, which Australia and others tabled at the Executive Council meeting in October 2019.

We continue to be encouraged by our level of engagement with States Parties. There is a recognition that the Chemical Weapons Convention has a key role to play in addressing not only historical but also future uses of chemical weapons. The Convention places an obligation on States Parties to ensure that developments in the field of chemistry are used exclusively for the benefit of humanity, not diverted for use as chemical weapons.

Australia, together with our co-sponsors, looks forward to continuing constructive discussion on this important initiative.

Thank you.