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AUSTRIA

**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR HEIDEMARIA GÜRER PERMANENT
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA TO THE OPCW
AT THE NINETY-FOURTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Mr Chairperson,
Mr Director-General,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Austria is fully aligned with the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union by the Ambassador of Germany, Ms Gudrun Lingner. I would, nevertheless, like to deliver a few additional remarks in our national capacity. Austria would also like to thank Ambassador Andrea Perugini of Italy for his unwavering work as Chair of the Executive Council during these challenging times and congratulate Ambassador Agustin Vasquez Gomez for his appointment as new Chair. We are looking forward to working with him and have full confidence in his ability to guide our work and his vision for a return to consensus and trust.

Austria's first session as member of the Executive Council comes at a crucial time and is taking place under singular circumstances: While the special format of this meeting is shaped by the requirements created by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are also faced with an exceptional situation within the Organisation. This Organisation has been created to achieve "effective progress towards general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control". Yet, we are faced with a credible and impartial report that not only shows that chemical weapons have been used in the territory of a State Party—a fact that was known before—but also that "there are reasonable grounds to believe that" these chemical weapons have been used by the armed forces of this State Party.

Austria would like to thank the Technical Secretariat, including the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), for their hard work, their professionalism, and their impartiality. It is regrettable that this crucial session of the Executive Council cannot take place in the usual format, as we do see the need for in-depth discussions of the complex issues at hand. However, we also see the great urgency of addressing the findings of the IIT in a meeting of the Executive Council, and any further delay would have been very detrimental to the credibility of the Organisation. Hence, we commend the Director-General and the Council Chair for their hard work to make a meeting possible, albeit in this restricted format, and we fully support the measures taken.



We, as members of the Executive Council, have the duty to now fulfil our role and to address the outrageous facts that are contained in the first report of the Investigation and Identification Team (S/1867/2020). This duty, thus, not only stems from our obligations under the Convention, but also from the international community as whole, as was highlighted by the calls of members of the Security Council to address this issue here in the appropriate framework of the OPCW.

As the IIT Report correctly highlights, its mandate is “to establish the facts”. Now that we do know the facts, it is up to the States Parties to address the issues of compliance with the Convention as well as of accountability for these crimes. We, therefore, welcome and support the draft decision that we will consider during this session, and we call on all members of the Council to do the same.

While the issue of the IIT report is a matter of priority, it should not overshadow the many other important issues in front of us. In this context, let me thank the staff of the Technical Secretariat, including the Director-General and the entire management team for their hard work during these past challenging weeks. All of us had to adapt to this new situation and it will be crucial to engage in a lessons-learned exercise in the coming weeks and months to identify what has worked and what needs to be improved in order to ensure the business continuity of the Organisation in the face of such unexpected situations. This should also take into account the best practices of other international organisations and we very much encourage an exchange of experiences between the disarmament organisations. We also look forward to receiving more information on how the Technical Secretariat is planning to resume the core tasks of the Organisation in the coming weeks.

As the specific format of this session of the Council has forced us to adapt our working methods, it certainly was appropriate to postpone some issues and organise online consultations for others; however, this should not be interpreted as these issues not being a priority for the Organisation. Austria, for instance, continues to support the draft decision presented by Australia, Switzerland, and the United States concerning the understanding regarding the aerosolized use of central nervous system-acting chemicals for law enforcement purposes, and we hope that the Council will soon be able to move forward with our discussions on it.

In closing, let me repeat our unwavering support for the work of the OPCW and our full confidence in the Technical Secretariat. As this probably is the last time that I will address this Council before leaving The Hague, let me also use this opportunity to bid my farewell to you, Mr Chairperson, to the Director-General, and the staff of the Technical Secretariat as well as to my colleagues. It was an honour and a privilege to work with all of you. If I have learned one thing during my time working with the OPCW, then it is that if this Organisation did not exist already, we would need to invent it.

I would kindly ask you, Mr Chairperson, to consider this statement as an official document of the Ninety-Fourth Session of the Executive Council and to post it on the OPCW external server and public website.

Thank you.