



National Statement by Australia
H.E. Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus, Permanent Representative of Australia to the
OPCW
At the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of States Parties

Mr Chair

Let me start by commending Director-General Arias and the staff of the OPCW for their dedication and commitment to the task of implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention over the course of this exacting year. They have continued to work hard towards making our vision of a world free of chemical weapons, a reality.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, technical and logistical challenges have been overcome in convening the Executive Council meetings, where important decisions were adopted, and all efforts have been made in ensuring this Conference proceeds. Australia acknowledges the work of the Technical Secretariat in delivering, often virtually, the range of programs the Organisation undertakes in any one year. I would also like to note progress made on the Centre for Chemistry and Technology project, to which Australia was pleased to contribute.

Mr Chair, Australia is appalled that Russian opposition figure, Alexei Navalny was poisoned in August by a nerve-agent of the Novichok group, a finding that was confirmed by an OPCW Technical Assistance Visit and three independent laboratories.

All Member States have an obligation to prohibit persons anywhere on their territory from undertaking any activity prohibited by the Convention. Australia strongly urges Russia to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into Mr Navalny's poisoning and to explain how an unscheduled nerve agent came to be used. We welcome the OPCW's offer to Germany and to Russia to provide analytical and technical assistance.

We rely on Member States' full compliance with their obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention to protect all countries, large and small, from chemical weapons.

Mr Chair, Australia welcomed the release earlier this year of the first report of the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) under its mandate of investigating and attributing responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. We commend the IIT for its rigorous, impartial and independent analysis, which attributed chemical weapons use to the Syria Arab Air Force on three occasions in Ltamenah in 2017. We express our full support for the Team's ongoing work.

The conclusion of the IIT report confirmed 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.

I would like to reiterate Australia's strong position that any finding of attribution must be acted upon by all States Parties. The world cannot stand idly by without taking action to prevent the use of chemical weapons, which use violates international law.

The Syrian regime's ongoing failure to fully declare its chemical weapons program, as noted in the IIT report, is another violation of the Convention.

The international community has shown that the collective stand against impunity for use of chemical weapons, and its support for the OPCW, is strong. The OPCW Executive Council acted on the IIT report, in July adopting a strong decision clearly stating that action would be taken unless Syria redressed the situation and brought itself into compliance with the Convention.

Regrettably, Syria has not complied with the requirements or timeframe set out in the July decision. It is therefore now for the Conference to take up this issue as recommended by the Executive Council and provided for under Article XII of the Convention. We look to States Parties to take meaningful action.

Mr Chair, Australia expresses its full confidence in the competence, integrity, and impartiality of the OPCW's technical expertise and investigative work, the IIT, Fact Finding Mission (FFM), and Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) and expresses our thanks for the work undertaken this year by these teams.

We know the Membership as a whole feels the same way.

To question the objectivity, impartiality, integrity or capacity of the OPCW and its investigative bodies is to prejudice the fight against chemical weapons.

Mr Chair, Australia supports the 2021 Programme and Budget as proposed. We acknowledge there are differing views regarding the format of the budget decision. Australia's view is that an omnibus format is the most efficient and effective way to address the many inter-linked elements of the OPCW's overall budget.

The budget as presented is fair and reasonable – it reflects the ongoing broad spectrum of the OPCW's work, but also the realities of the current difficult operating environment.

In particular the creation of the COVID-19 Variability Impact Special Fund and use of the 2018 Cash Surplus as an exceptional short-term response to the severe disruption and uncertainty caused by the global pandemic. We call on States Parties to support the budget.

I would like to strongly urge all States Parties to pay their assessed contributions in full and in a timely manner. A lag in the receipt of assessed contributions puts pressure on the OPCW's finances and limits the Technical Secretariat's ability to carry out important programmatic activities.

Mr Chair, At the Executive Council meeting in March I was honoured to be appointed, together with Ambassador Dupuy of Uruguay, as a co-facilitator of the facilitation on organisational governance issues. As I have said previously, administration is the essential foundation upon which all other work can take place.

A strong and appropriately structured OPCW will put the organisation on the best footing to meet the challenges of the future. We must ensure the Director General is provided with the support he needs in this regard. I look forward to continuing to progress this important work over the coming months.

Mr Chair, It is disappointing that a number of factors, not least COVID-19, worked against us in seeking to bring the draft decision recommending that the aerosolized use of Central Nervous System-Acting Chemicals (CNSACs) is understood to be inconsistent with law enforcement purposes as a purpose not prohibited under the Convention, to the Executive Council for consideration and response this year.

We have been encouraged by the high level of engagement from a broad range of States Parties. We thank Switzerland for its tireless advocacy on CNSACs, and for US efforts more recently to bring this decision to the attention of the Council.

We also thank the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) for its work over many years on this issue. We remind States Parties of the Director-General's formal advice that adoption of the draft decision would have nil budgetary impact.

It is clear to us that there is genuine interest in this issue, and we want to ensure it has the broadest support possible. There is a recognition that the Chemical Weapons Convention has a key role to play in addressing not only historical uses of chemical weapons but also preventing their re-emergence.

The Convention places an obligation on States Parties to ensure that developments in the field of chemistry are not diverted for use as chemical weapons. We have a strong interest in maintaining the active and positive engagement of States Parties on the issue. Australia, together with our co-sponsors, looks forward to continuing constructive discussion among all States Parties on this important initiative.

Thank you Mr Chair.