



National Statement by Australia

H.E. Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus, Permanent Representative of Australia to the OPCW

At the Ninety-Sixth session of the Executive Council, 9-12 March 2021

Mr Chair,

I would like to start by thanking the Technical Secretariat and Executive Council members for their ongoing flexibility and good will in holding this Council session. It is important for our work to continue, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australia is deeply disappointed with the conclusion of the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), following its twenty-third round of consultations with the Syrian Arab Republic, that Syria's declaration still cannot be considered accurate or complete.

This is an unacceptable situation. Syria has been given more than enough time and understanding to fully address the gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies identified by the DAT.

It is time for States Parties to say enough is enough. The decision of this Council in July 2020 (EC-94/DEC.2) set out a clear and reasonable pathway for Syria to comply with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). It is regrettable that Syria has chosen to ignore this.

Australia supports the draft decision on Addressing the Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic, to be considered at the Twenty-Fifth session of the Conference of States Parties when it resumes in April.

We call on all CWC Member States to support the decision. It is a reasonable response. Importantly, it does not close the door to Syria. Instead, it provides a clear pathway for Syria to come into compliance with the Convention and to take its place among those responsible countries opposed to the use of chemical weapons any time, anywhere, by anyone.

Mr Chair, we are also disappointed with Russia's apparent withdrawal of its request for an OPCW Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) to investigate the poisoning of Alexei Navalny.

Serious questions remain about how Mr Navalny was poisoned by a nerve agent.

Australia maintains it is incumbent on the Russian Government to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the incident and to cooperate fully with others, including the OPCW. We now call on Russia to honour their obligations.

Mr Chair, I would like to commend the Technical Secretariat for its ongoing commitment to addressing issues of organisational governance, including through the facilitation co-chaired by Australia.

I would particularly like to commend the Secretariat for taking practical steps to better promote gender and geographic balance within the organisation, while at the same time recognising the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity.

It is my hope that the work we are doing now will help ensure the OPCW remains the world's pre-eminent centre of chemical weapons knowledge and expertise, and that the organisation is structured accordingly. The work of the OPCW will remain crucial to our collective security long into the future, as we strive towards the complete elimination of all chemical weapons, past, present and future.

Mr Chair, the COVID-pandemic has shown us that we cannot continue with a business as usual approach. We must be more flexible – States Parties and the Technical Secretariat.

Australia supports the initiative by Germany proposing the convening of Executive Council meetings in emergency circumstances. This is a practical response to a genuine risk. I encourage all States Parties to support this important initiative.

At the same time, Australia encourages the Technical Secretariat to improve its technical capabilities to better support virtual engagement by States Parties, including in the OPCW's policy making organs.

Finally, I would like to reiterate Australia's support for the draft decision that sets out our understanding regarding the aerosolised use of central nervous system acting chemicals (CNSACs) for law enforcement purposes.

Mr Chair, support for this decision has continued to grow, as has the number of co-sponsors. We have been encouraged by the high level of engagement from a broad range of States Parties.

It is clear to us that there is genuine interest in the substance of this decision and a recognition that the CWC has a key role to play in addressing future uses of chemical weapons. It is Australia's view that it is time to act. We encourage all Council members to support the draft decision.

Thank you, Mr Chair.