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Portuguese Presidency
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**STATEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
BY H.E. AMBASSADOR ROSA BATOREU
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF PORTUGAL TO THE OPCW
AT THE 96th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
(The Hague, 9-12 March 2021)**

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

I have the honour of speaking on behalf of the European Union (EU).

The Candidate Countries Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey, and the EFTA (European Free Trade Association) countries Iceland and Norway, members of the EEA (European Economic Area), as well as Georgia and Ukraine align themselves with this statement.

Monaco and San Marino also associate themselves with this statement.

Mr Chairperson,

The European Union pays tribute to Ambassador Agustin Vasquez Gomez of El Salvador for his dedication and professionalism during his tenure as the Chairperson of the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). His efficient chairmanship contributed to ensuring continuity in the work of the Council, for which we applaud and thank him.

We also take this opportunity to thank the OPCW Director General, Ambassador Fernando Arias, and his staff for their efforts to continue to implement the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) under exceptional circumstances. Despite of the prolonged pandemic (COVID-19), the Technical Secretariat (TS) has successfully continued to deliver on the taskings given to investigate and report on all aspects of the Syrian chemical weapons programme as well as to deliver on its capacity-building and international cooperation mandate through e-learning solutions. We appreciate the Director-General's efforts from the beginning

of his tenure to improve gender balance and geographical distribution of positions within the Technical Secretariat. We encourage him to continue these efforts with a view to ensuring a more diverse and representative Technical Secretariat as well as to strengthening training and knowledge management to mitigate the effects of rotation. We also commend the Director-General for his efforts to enhance gender mainstreaming, and welcome the on-going gender audit of the Organisation.

The European Union reiterates its full confidence in the OPCW Technical Secretariat, its professionalism, impartiality and well-established technical expertise in implementing the Convention and tasks assigned by the States Parties. We remain steadfast in defending the Organisation against deliberate and baseless attacks on its integrity and credibility. In this context, we underline the complementarity of the work between the OPCW and the United Nations and appreciate the regular sharing of information of the OPCW activities and investigations with the United Nations Secretary-General and the UN Security Council.

Mr Chairperson,

Accountability is essential to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons. The use of chemical weapons by anyone – be it a State or a non-State actor – anywhere, at any time and under any circumstances is a violation of international law and can amount to the most serious crimes of international concern - war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The European Union strongly condemns the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Arab Air Force as concluded by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) in its report to the OPCW Executive Council and to the Secretary General of the United Nations on 8 April 2020. Those identified responsible for the use of chemical weapons must be held accountable for these reprehensible acts. The European Union looks forward to the release of the next IIT report and is determined to ensure full follow up of all findings.

The European Union expresses concerns regarding the DAT report (EC-95/HP/DG.2.Add1 of 18 November 2020) that highlights again the inconsistencies in the Syrian initial declarations and undeclared facilities, more than seven years after Syria acceded to the CWC. We urge Syria to provide the relevant information to the Technical Secretariat in order to resolve the pending issues.

In response to the findings of the IIT report, the Executive Council in July 2020 (EC-94) took a crucially important decision on addressing the possession and use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic (EC-94/DEC.2 of 9 July 2020). In accordance with the Convention, the decision set clear and verifiable parameters for action that the Syrian Arab Republic was required to take within 90 days to redress the situation and to return to full compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In his report to the Executive Council on 14 October 2020 (ref. EC-96/DG.1), the OPCW Director-General informed that the Syrian Arab Republic had not declared to the Technical Secretariat any facilities where the chemical weapons used in the 24, 25 and 30 March 2017 attacks were developed, produced, stockpiled, and operationally stored for delivery, nor any chemical weapons it currently possesses. Consequently, in accordance with Article XII of the Convention, it will be upon the Conference of the States Parties to consider further action.

The European Union considers that the draft Decision entitled “Addressing the Possession and use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic” (C-25/DEC/CRP.10, dated 25 November 2020) is an appropriate response by the Conference of States Parties to the clear violation of the core principles of the Convention. The draft Decision is co-sponsored by 46 States Parties. The European Union urges all States Parties to live up to their responsibility to protect the integrity of the Convention, and to support the adoption of the draft Decision in the resumed session of the CSP-25 later this spring.

For its part, the European Union has already imposed restrictive measures on five high level Syrian officials and scientists and one entity for their role in the development and use of chemical weapons. We are ready to consider introducing further measures as appropriate, and continue to work towards ensuring accountability for those responsible for these egregious crimes on national as well as international levels. The European Union also continues to demonstrate its commitment to strengthen collective efforts to ensure accountability of perpetrators for chemical attacks through the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons.

Mr. Chairperson,

The European Union reiterates its strong concerns that the Russian Federation has not reacted to international calls to thoroughly and transparently investigate the assassination attempt on Alexei Navalny who was poisoned in Russia by a chemical nerve agent of the “Novichok” group in August 2020. The poisoning has been confirmed, without doubt, by specialised laboratories in Germany, France and Sweden, as well as by the OPCW.

Impunity for the use of chemical weapons must not and will not be tolerated. Those responsible for the assassination attempt on Mr. Navalny must be brought to justice. On 14 October 2020 under its chemical weapons sanctions regime, the European Union imposed restrictive measures against six Russian individuals and one entity responsible for inducing and providing support to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny with the Novichok nerve agent.

Furthermore, the European Union was disconcerted by the withdrawal on 16 December 2020 of Russia’s request for a Technical Assistance Visit despite the readiness of the OPCW Technical Secretariat to deploy its experts in order to help clarify the case.

The European Union once again urges the Russian Federation to disclose and credibly explain the circumstances of the assassination attempt in full transparency and without further delay, in accordance with the obligations defined in Article VII of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which urges all States Parties not to permit in any place under its control any activity prohibited by the Convention.

Mr. Chairperson,

The Chemical Weapons Convention is a key instrument of the global non-proliferation and disarmament architecture. Implementation of the Convention requires a predictable and solid financial base to continue its work for the benefit of all States Parties. We therefore call on all States Parties to pay their assessed contributions in full and on time. The European Union

Member States assessed contributions combined make up almost 25% of the regular budget. In addition, the EU's voluntary contribution in support of the OPCW key activities and operations for the period 2019-2022 through two dedicated EU Council Decisions amounts to EUR 12,6 million. This voluntary contribution does not include voluntary contributions made by EU Member States in their national capacity.

A successful transformation of the OPCW laboratory into a Centre for Chemistry and Technology (CCT) will be key to enhancing the Organisation's capacity to perform its core tasks in verification, inspection and capacity building. A significant number of States Parties have committed voluntary funding to the establishment of the "ChemTechCentre". The European Union and its Member States have made substantial voluntary contributions, in total amounting to EUR 15,9 million. We call on others to support and contribute to this project which will benefit all States Parties. We welcome the good progress made in the implementation of the project and the granting by the local authorities of the Irrevocable Construction Permit for the construction of the new premises in Pijnacker.

The European Union believes that the external auditor of the OPCW should be nominated based on the established technical merits, following an assessment of the nominations, as was the practice in the past, on the basis of the factors outlined in Note S/1824/2020. In light of the need to ensure continuity and to avoid gaps in the financial oversight of the Organisation, the European Union considers it important that the Conference of States Parties nominates the new external auditor at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Chairperson,

In the last twelve months, the ongoing pandemic has shown to what extent the work of International Organisations including the OPCW may be affected when in-person meetings or sessions are not possible. The use of modern technologies, including virtual meeting modalities, contributes to upholding interaction, which is even more necessary in times of crisis. Nonetheless, the procedure for convening virtual sessions or meetings of the policy making organs of the OPCW is not yet clearly defined, nor is the technology in place that could ensure that the Organisation can exercise its key activities—notably convening sessions or meetings of the Executive Council remotely. The European Union therefore unequivocally supports the ongoing consultation process amongst States Parties aiming to establish procedures that would allow convening virtual meetings or sessions of the Council in specific emergency circumstances. We also support the efforts of the Technical Secretariat to find the most appropriate technological tools for remote meetings or sessions of the Executive Council.

I would kindly ask you to consider this statement as an official document and post it on the OPCW External Server and public website.

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