



IIT Coordinator's Remarks on the Second Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team

As delivered on 12 April 2021

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Today, in my capacity as Coordinator of the Investigation and Identification Team, I submitted to the OPCW Director General, the Second Report of the IIT. The Director General has provided it to the Executive Council of the OPCW and to the United Nations Secretary-General for their respective consideration, as mandated by the Conference of States Parties on its Decision of 27 June 2018 (C-SS-4/DEC.3).

Upon instructions of the Director General, it is now my privilege to present it to you. Needless to say, this presentation does not substitute or modify in any way the Report itself, as released under S/1943/2021 dated 12 April 2021.

As is known, the Director-General established the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) as the mechanism required by the Decision by the Conference of the States Parties entitled "Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use" (C-SS-4/DEC.3, dated 27 June 2018). The IIT began its work in June 2019 and issued its first report on 8 April 2020.

The IIT focuses on certain incidents for which the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) had determined that use or likely use of chemical weapons on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic occurred and for which the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism had not reached a final conclusion.

It is important to keep in mind that the IIT is not a judicial body with the authority to assign individual criminal responsibility, nor does the IIT have the authority to make final findings of non-compliance with the Convention.

The mandate of the IIT is to establish the facts related to perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons by identifying all information potentially relevant to the origin of those weapons.

The second report of the IIT, issued today, sets out the findings of the investigations conducted in the period between April 2020 and March 2021, focusing on the incident that took place in Saraqib, the Syrian Arab Republic, on 4 February 2018.

On the basis of all the information obtained and its analysis, the IIT concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that at approximately 21:22 on 4 February 2018, during ongoing attacks against Saraqib, a military helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force codenamed "Alpha-253", under the control of the Tiger Forces, departing from the Al Mujanzarat airbase, hit

eastern Saraqib by dropping at least one cylinder. The cylinder ruptured and released a toxic gas, chlorine, which dispersed over a large area affecting 12 named individuals.

The IIT reached its conclusions on the basis of the degree of certainty of “reasonable grounds”, as the standard generally applied by fact-finding bodies.

The conclusions in this report are based on the combination, consistency, and corroboration of all of the information gathered as a whole.

In its work, the IIT adhered to applicable OPCW procedures, including with respect to chain of custody, supplemented as appropriate.

In pursuing its investigation for the incident in Saraqib on 4 February 2018, the IIT considered various hypotheses as to how this incident might have occurred and then proceeded to develop concrete scenarios based on all available information. Among these scenarios, the IIT considered, in particular, the hypothesis that the incident had been “staged” by terrorist armed groups in order to forge accusations against the Syrian Arab Army. Several leads were followed in this respect. However, these leads were not supported by any concrete evidence, and the IIT – despite numerous attempts – was unable to corroborate these hypotheses neither on its own nor through material obtained by States Parties and other entities.

As to how the IIT actually proceeded with its investigation, this is fully explored in the Report itself. In short, I must mention that the IIT obtained and examined results and technical assessments from a variety of experts and specialists working at different institutions, with different nationalities. Thus, in addition to the Designated Laboratories used by the FFM for their analyses, the IIT reached out to another laboratory for further studies, and to an independent chemistry expert from yet another institution. Assessments of prevailing meteorological conditions were obtained from separate sources. Toxicologists with expertise in chemical incidents – but who had never before been involved in any assessment of this incident – were consulted to complement the analyses. Munition specialists from various countries reached concurring conclusions on the craters and the cylinders considered by the IIT during its investigations, as detailed in the Report. Thus, the conclusions of various experts were considered. The IIT further engaged specialists in geolocation, and a separate forensic institute for the extraction and analysis of metadata to assist in verifying the authenticity and reliability of electronic material obtained.

The IIT thus reviewed thousands of files, amounting to more than 400 gigabytes, obtained 44 statements from more than 30 witnesses, and considered data related to 18 separate samples. The IIT assessed this information holistically, scrutinising carefully its probative value through a widely shared methodology in compliance with best practices of international fact-finding bodies and commissions of inquiry.

The symptoms of the victims are, overall, consistent with chlorine exposure under the estimated wind direction and speed. The modelling of gas dispersion and the casualty hazard areas were developed on the basis of two independent technical assessments: a topographic study, and an assessment of the behaviour of chlorine gas under the prevailing circumstances. These corroborate the statements of witnesses and other information obtained.

Moreover, an independent chemist was asked to consider (i) data received from two designated laboratories on samples, and (ii) whether the results of the analysis could suggest that the incident was “staged” to resemble a chlorine attack. The IIT also commissioned an analysis of various household chlorine-based products readily available on the market in the area. None of the chemicals that may indicate dispersal of these products in the environment could be identified in samples from the Saraqib incident. The chemical analyses, in the context of further inquiries, are instead consistent with the use of chlorine as a weapon on the evening of 4 February 2018.

The accounts of the witnesses interviewed by the FFM and the IIT are also consistent and indicate that two cylinders (barrels) – identified as Cylinder 1 and Cylinder 2 in the Report – were dropped by one helicopter in the eastern part of Saraqib at approximately 21:22 on 4 February 2018. Out of an abundance of caution, and for the reasons discussed in the Report, the IIT confined itself to considering only Cylinder 2.

The crater closest to Cylinder 2 (identified as Crater 2) is consistent with its kinetic impact. Munition specialists concluded that its shape and depth, as well as the pattern of discoloration of the nearby grass, indicate that chlorine was released upon rupture of Cylinder 2.

The alternative allegations put forth, particularly that the incident was “staged” could not be substantiated in any way.

According to various specialists, Cylinder 2 most likely ruptured due to kinetic impact. The damage to Cylinder 2 is not consistent with large explosive, but rather with it being air delivered and impacting the ground from a significant altitude. The IIT did not obtain any concrete information substantiating that a cylinder could have been dropped somewhere else and brought to the area in question in the hours or days before, on, or after 4 February 2018.

Moreover, several fragments attached to Cylinder 2 and found in its vicinity are consistent with the steel frame observed in at least one previous incident. This is a design consistent with the type of munitions that can be delivered from a helicopter.

Different sources provided information confirming that a helicopter codenamed “Alpha 253” and departing from al Mujanzarat airbase on 4 February at around 21:02 hovered over the east of Saraqib at around 21:22, exactly when witnesses located northeast of Crater 2 described hearing the sound of helicopter and items falling and hitting the ground, and soon thereafter experiencing symptoms consistent with exposure to chlorine gas. More information on the general military situation in the area and its significance for this investigation is contained in the Report itself.

The Secretariat is grateful for the ample support received during the IIT’s investigation from States Parties.

The challenges faced by the IIT nonetheless included its inability to access the site of the incidents in the Syrian Arab Republic. The IIT regrets that this access was not granted despite: (a) various requests addressed by the Technical Secretariat to the authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic; (b) the obligation by the Syrian Arab Republic to cooperate with the Technical Secretariat under paragraph 7 of Article VII of the Chemical Weapons Convention; and (c) the obligation incumbent on the Syrian Arab Republic, pursuant to United Nations Security

Council resolution 2118 (2013), to cooperate fully with the OPCW. This resolution requires the Syrian Arab Republic to provide OPCW staff with access to all sites and individuals that the OPCW considers to be of importance for the purpose of its mandate. The IIT has expressed on several occasions its readiness to meet with representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic at their convenience and at a location of their choosing to discuss the progress of its activities and their modalities. The IIT has also provided the Syrian authorities with specific questions and lines of inquiry in relation to this and other incidents, without receiving any response.

The IIT overcame these challenges through the hard work of the team, composed by experts coming from all the different regional groups represented in the organisation. As the IIT Coordinator, I can proudly say that the team is small in number but big in commitment and professionalism.

The decision of 27 June 2018 by the Conference of the States Parties requires the Technical Secretariat to provide the reports on the IIT investigations to the OPCW Executive Council and to the United Nations Secretary-General for their consideration, and to preserve and provide information to the mechanism established by the United Nations General Assembly in resolution 71/248 (2016), as well as to any relevant investigatory entities established under the auspices of the United Nations. Accordingly, the IIT has endeavoured to compile this report and its related records and findings in a manner suitable for future use by these bodies. This also means that the IIT has carefully considered, in reaching its conclusions, that the information used in this report may be assessed and used by other bodies in the future.

Thank you all for your attention.
