



Ninety-Sixth Session
9 – 12 March 2021

EC-96/DG.18*
9 March 2021
Original: ENGLISH

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL TO THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AT ITS NINETY-SIXTH SESSION

1. I warmly welcome all delegations to the Ninety-Sixth Session of the Executive Council.
2. At the outset, I would like to thank Ambassador Agustín Vásquez Gómez for his continuing able leadership and guidance of the Council.
3. We commence the first Council session of the year by recognising our achievements and preparing for the challenges that lie ahead.
4. At the end of 2020, the first part of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties was held, in an adapted modality, from 30 November to 1 December. The successful organisation and delivery of this event was the result of the goodwill and understanding of States Parties, and of the diligent preparatory efforts of the Secretariat staff.
5. The Secretariat remains committed to ensuring that the session is held in accordance with the statutory requirements of the Convention and with the highest possible standards of health and safety for all delegates and Secretariat staff members.
6. In this context, the Secretariat continues to explore options and modalities for conducting hybrid or fully online meetings of the OPCW policy-making organs. Identification of the requirements for an OPCW remote platform is currently under way. Technical preparations will begin, including the procurement of hardware and software components, installation and integration with existing conference systems, and testing.
7. Once in place, an introductory session on the use of the platform will be offered to State Party delegates in the summer. This capability is an important component of the OPCW's digital resilience.
8. As such, the one-time costs of the platform are being supported by the Trust Fund for Security and Business Continuity. I express my sincere thanks to Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for their generous contributions to this Trust Fund.
9. It has now been a year since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented time, the Secretariat has demonstrated, more than ever, that it remains determined to continue to deliver, in line with our mandate. We have continued to adapt

* Reissued for technical reasons.



and evolve our activities to the changing global conditions. The latest update on the OPCW's programmatic and operating posture was provided to States Parties through a Note issued on 18 February (S/1930/2021).

10. During the intersessional period, the future Centre for Chemistry and Technology—the ChemTech Centre—made steady progress, within the planned timeline and budget.
11. I am pleased to share with you that an important milestone has been achieved in this regard. The irrevocable construction permit for the Centre was granted by the Municipality of Pijnacker-Nootdorp on 3 February. The OPCW now has full approval by the regulatory authorities to proceed with the construction of the Centre, according to the proposed design. This progress has been achieved by a small team of dedicated experts in the Secretariat, working in difficult circumstances. I wish to express how much their dedication and efforts are appreciated.
12. This year, the Secretariat will continue to adapt its programmes, using new modalities. In this context, I refer to the activities of the International Cooperation and Assistance Division, which is providing online training and events in all areas of its mandate.
13. During the reporting period, these modalities included:
 - (a) a national legislative review forum, to support States Parties in fulfilling their Article VII obligations;
 - (b) training for first responders in the Asia and GRULAC regions; and
 - (c) capacity-building activities in chemical safety and security management.
14. A flexible and adaptable plan for international cooperation and assistance events in 2021 has been developed. It foresees the resumption of in-person activities when conditions will allow. The implementation of the plan will be monitored, and adjusted, throughout the year, in coordination with stakeholders.
15. We have also continued to make progress in all areas of the Syrian chemical weapons dossier.
16. On 11 December 2020, at the invitation of the presidency of the United Nations Security Council, I briefed the Security Council on the Syrian chemical weapons dossier and other matters. While the OPCW is an organisation independent from the United Nations, I accept, with the highest interest, to contribute to the task of the Security Council. This represents a useful complement to the monthly reports on this matter, which the Secretariat sends to the Executive Council and to the Security Council.
17. During the briefing, I responded to questions that were asked during a session that lasted more than four hours. I did this, keeping in mind my decision not to comment on elements put forward in the media and to never evaluate or give opinions on decisions adopted by the OPCW policy-making organs, as my role is to implement them, and not to express any views about what States Parties decide. Consequently, I refused to respond to questions formulated in those terms.

18. With regard to the verification of the Syrian initial declaration, the activities and outcomes of the twenty-third round of consultations between the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) and the Syrian Arab Republic were reported to the Council on 18 November, in two separate documents:
 - (a) first, in an addendum (dated 18 November) to the report of the DAT of 1 October 2020; and
 - (b) second, through a Note by the Director-General (EC-95/HP/DG.3, dated 18 November 2020).
19. These documents reported that, during the consultations, three issues related to the Syrian initial declaration had been closed, while 19 issues remained outstanding. The reports specified that one of the 19 outstanding issues pertains to a chemical weapons production facility (CWPF). This facility was declared by the Syrian National Authority as never having been used for the production of chemical weapons. A review of all the information and other materials gathered by the DAT since 2014, including samples, indicates that production or weaponisation of chemical warfare nerve agents took place at this facility.
20. On 21 October 2020, the Secretariat requested the Syrian Arab Republic to declare the types and quantities of chemical agents produced and/or weaponised at this site, and over which period of time these activities took place (in line with the relevant provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention). The Secretariat has not yet received a reply to this request from the Syrian National Authority.
21. The twenty-fourth round of consultations between the DAT and the Syrian Arab Republic took place between 7 and 25 February. During the consultations, the DAT conducted a number of technical meetings, interviews, and site visits. The details of the activities conducted by the DAT in this round of consultations are provided in my report (EC-96/HP/DG.1, dated 5 March 2021), which has been made available to the Council. I wish to express how much the dedication of the members of the DAT is appreciated, while they deploy in very difficult conditions.
22. At this stage, considering the issues that remain unresolved, the Secretariat assesses that the declaration submitted by the Syrian Arab Republic cannot be considered accurate and complete.
23. In any event, the Secretariat will continue to bilaterally engage with the Syrian Arab Republic to conduct the verification of the Syrian declaration, in accordance with paragraph 8 of Article IV of the Convention and relevant decisions.
24. Turning to allegations of use of chemical weapons on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Secretariat provided an update to the Council on the work of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) through Note S/1922/2020 (dated 21 December 2020). Currently, the FFM is continuing to analyse information collected from the most recent deployments.
25. On 2 October and 20 November 2020, the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) made the first two transfers of material to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM). These transfers were conducted pursuant to paragraph 12 of decision C-SS-4/DEC.3 adopted by the Conference on 27 June 2018, and in response to a request received from the IIIM on 28 August 2020.

26. The IIT continues its investigations into several incidents and will issue further reports in due course. The next report should be published before the summer of 2021.
27. Pursuant to paragraph 11 of the Council decision adopted on 11 November 2016, the Secretariat conducted the seventh round of inspections of the Barzah and Jamrayah facilities of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) between 8 and 13 November 2020. The samples collected during this deployment were split at the OPCW Laboratory in the presence of a representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, and were subsequently sent to designated laboratories for analysis. The outcome of these inspections will be reported in due course.
28. As I have previously reported to the Council, a Schedule 2.B.04 chemical was detected during the third round of inspections at the Barzah facilities of the SSRC in November 2018. The Syrian Arab Republic has yet to provide sufficient technical information, or explanations, regarding this finding.
29. Pursuant to decision EC-M-43/DEC.1 adopted by the Council on 24 July 2014, the Secretariat installed remote monitoring systems at four sealed underground structures in the Syrian Arab Republic that are former CWPFs. The mandate related to these activities expired in 2020.
30. In November 2020, the Secretariat conducted its final visit to the underground structures and observed the removal of the monitoring equipment. On that occasion the Secretariat reminded the Syrian Arab Republic that the underground structures should remain sealed as part of the destruction plan agreed by the Council.
31. Following the issuance of the first IIT report, the Council adopted a decision last July requesting the Syrian Arab Republic to declare to the Secretariat, within 90 days, the chemical weapons used in March 2017 attacks in Ltamenah (EC-94/DEC.2, dated 9 July 2020). Under that decision, the Syrian Arab Republic was also requested to declare all the chemical weapons it currently possesses, and to resolve all of the outstanding issues regarding its initial declaration. Pursuant to paragraph 6 of that decision, I issued a report (EC-96/DG.1, dated 14 October 2020) within 100 days of the decision as required. The report stated that the Syrian Arab Republic had not completed the measures I have just outlined. On the basis of the information provided, it is up to you, States Parties, to decide how you wish to proceed.
32. On 6 October 2020, I received a request from the Russian Federation for a technical assistance visit under subparagraph 38(e) of Article VIII of the Convention. The Russian Federation communicated to the Secretariat that the purpose of this visit was to cooperate with Russian experts in examining the results of the analyses of biomaterial samples collected from Mr Alexei Navalny by Russian experts.
33. Correspondence regarding this request was exchanged between the Secretariat and the Russian Federation from October to December 2020, to define the legal, technical, operational, and logistical parameters of the visit. All of this correspondence has been made available on the OPCW public website, in the interest of transparency and for the information of all States Parties.

34. In a letter dated 9 December, I reiterated that the Secretariat was ready to deploy a team of experts to the Russian Federation on short notice, provided that three outstanding issues were resolved: Specifically, three issues remained unresolved:
 - (a) first, the need to sign an ad hoc privileges and immunities agreement before a Secretariat team would deploy;
 - (b) second, that Mr Navalny's consent for the Secretariat to access his medical file and samples in the custody of the Russian Federation be obtained; and
 - (c) third, that the Secretariat team would work independently and not jointly with Russian experts, as desired by the Russian Federation.
35. In a letter dated 16 December, the Russian Federation concluded that this mission no longer seemed relevant.
36. On 15 February, I received Ambassador Shulgin of the Russian Federation, who shared with me a verbal message from Minister Lavrov in relation to the Navalny case. Minister Lavrov requested me to instruct the experts of the OPCW Technical Secretariat to give thorough consideration to the ideas contained in an open letter sent to the Minister by a scientist named Vitali Kozak.
37. Through a letter to the Russian Ambassador on 3 March, I responded by expressing that the policy of the Secretariat is to not comment on opinions or analyses published in the media. Both the informal translation from Russian to English of Minister Lavrov's verbal message and my letter to the Russian Ambassador have been put on the OPCW website and are available to States Parties.
38. Turning now to destruction-related activities, verification at chemical weapons destruction facilities in the United States of America has continued, thanks to modifications that ensure the health and safety of inspectors and personnel on site. As at 28 February, a total of 69,407 metric tonnes (MT), or 98.5%, of declared Category 1 chemical weapons had been destroyed under verification by the Secretariat.
39. The Council's biannual visit to the United States may not be possible this year because of the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. Since last year, the Chairperson of the Council and I have been in close contact with the Permanent Representation of the United States with a view to postponing this visit to the last quarter of the year. This visit was initially planned for this spring, and further postponement to next year may become inevitable until vaccines are more widely available.
40. China and Japan have continued bilateral consultations to make progress on the excavation, recovery, and destruction of abandoned chemical weapons (ACW) at various sites in China. Destruction operations and related activities, such as excavations and recoveries, have been suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
41. As at 28 February, around 83,650 items of ACW had been recovered, of which 57,701 have been destroyed. The Secretariat remains in close contact with China and Japan regarding the latest developments on these matters. Inspections related to these activities will take place later in the year, when conditions allow, in consultation with the concerned State Party.

42. In December 2020, Article VI industry inspections were suspended. This year, 241 Article VI inspections are again planned. Under the current circumstances, it becomes increasingly unlikely that the Secretariat will be able to carry out all of its mandated Article VI inspections for 2021. The Secretariat will continue to provide regular updates on progress of the 2021 inspection plan, during the meetings of the Industry Cluster and the sessions of the Council.
43. The Secretariat is closely monitoring the Organisation's cash position as well as the impact that the pandemic is having on programme implementation. As I noted in my opening address to the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference (C-25/DG.19, dated 30 November 2020), the Organisation was encountering a tenuous cash position in 2020. A total of EUR 7.5 million from the Working Capital Fund (WCF) had to be used in the last quarter of the year, out of a total of EUR 8.1 million available. Advance payments of 2021 assessed contributions of approximately EUR 6.6 million received in December 2020 were vital to carrying the Secretariat through the end of the year. The cash withdrawn from the WCF was returned to the Fund in February.
44. However, in light of the dynamics of 2020, it is again possible, as the year progresses, that a tenuous cash position may impact the implementation of the 2021 Programme and Budget. I must therefore reiterate the importance of all States Parties paying your assessed contributions as early as possible, in the course of the year, and other reimbursable costs for inspection activities. States Parties will continue to be kept informed of the Organisation's cash position in a timely manner through the Secretariat's monthly financial situation reports.
45. The transition to a biennial Programme and Budget for the 2022–2023 biennium is well in progress. This transition will provide a number of benefits, including a longer-term planning approach for States Parties and the Secretariat. I will present the Draft Biennial Programme and Budget for 2022–2023 to States Parties in early July. This biennial Programme and Budget will identify the Organisation's funding needs and set our programmatic priorities until the end of 2023. These priorities will be shaped by both the changing security environment and the evolving needs of States Parties.
46. Adaptation is critical in this current dynamic landscape. To succeed, the retention and development of knowledge and skills will be critical. In this context, I wish to thank Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus of Australia and Ambassador Laura Dupuy of Uruguay for facilitating States Parties' discussions on several internal governance topics, including the tenure policy and knowledge management. The work carried out by Ambassador Dupuy and Ambassador Neuhaus is very much appreciated.
47. The Secretariat continues to work on ensuring both equitable geographical distribution and gender balance.
48. Yesterday was International Women's Day. In this context, I am pleased to report to States Parties on my commitment to gender balance. States Parties will be interested to learn that, two and a half years ago, out of 10 upper management positions, only one was held by a woman. As of 9 March, out of the 10 positions in the Organisation's upper management, six are now held by women.

49. The ChemTech Centre will also play an important role in preserving and developing knowledge and skills related to chemical weapons, and in ensuring that the Organisation remains fit for purpose in the future. The Centre will allow the Organisation to meet the needs of States Parties by providing capacity building in chemical security and assistance and protection, and by fostering international cooperation in the peaceful uses of chemistry. It will allow us to keep pace with developments in science and technology and to ensure that our robust verification regime incorporates and benefits from technological advancements.
50. The Secretariat is carefully examining which already existing and new activities can be delivered at the ChemTech Centre, in order to maximise our current resources and enhance programmatic delivery. I have initiated very informal consultations with the Ambassadors Permanent Representatives to hear and incorporate their priorities into the activities offered at, and through, the ChemTech Centre. I intend to go on with these informal consultations in the coming months. This input is critical to ensuring that a list of well-defined programmes to be carried out at the Centre is ready when the construction of the Centre is completed.
51. The final design of the ChemTech Centre has been completed and the construction tender process is in the final phase. We plan to sign the contract with the selected company in the coming weeks. The construction of the facility is scheduled to begin this summer. If conditions permit, it would be my pleasure to welcome States Parties' representatives to a groundbreaking event to mark this milestone.
52. To summarise, the Secretariat is making good progress simultaneously across three lines, namely:
 - (a) the construction of the Centre;
 - (b) the identification of the programmes to be carried out at the Centre; and
 - (c) the study of the ways to finance these programmes.
53. With regard to the budget for the construction, to date, financial contributions and pledges totalling over EUR 33.4 million have been received from 46 countries, the European Union, and other donors. Approximately EUR 40,000 is still required to reach our current funding target. I thank you, all contributors, for your meaningful support.
54. The ChemTech Centre will also play an important role in ensuring business continuity in case of an operational disruption to OPCW Headquarters. In this regard, the Secretariat has completed a business impact assessment to determine the capabilities needed to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of the Organisation should a disruption occur. The assessment has identified the need for further development of capacities in the area of information and communication technologies and related security components. The Secretariat continually reviews the threats facing the OPCW to ensure the protection of its information, facilities, staff, and State Party representatives on site.
55. In the current threat landscape, enhancements and updates to physical security infrastructure will be required to deliver the appropriate level of protection to OPCW Headquarters, personnel, and visitors. These updates will complement investments in cybersecurity to ensure all aspects of the OPCW's operations are protected and secure.

56. The Organisation has undertaken ambitious projects to respond to the dual challenges of increasing cybersecurity threats and remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to keep the Secretariat connected and secure. The Secretariat has been investing in assuring the confidentiality and integrity of OPCW's systems and information. In January, we completed a major migration to an improved email and work platform that allows staff to collaborate online in a secure manner. This transition was completed on time and on budget.
57. I am pleased to note that the core System of Record of the new enterprise resource planning (ERP) solution went live on 4 January 2021. The remaining ERP components, consisting of assets management and travel management, are planned for delivery in the second half of 2021. This will complete this vital modernisation of our core financial and human resources IT infrastructure.
58. Furthermore, we have completed the development activities on our new extranet platform. This is a modern and reliable platform that will provide easy access to official-series documents, decisions, and meeting information. I am aware that the project is of major interest to many States Parties, and am therefore pleased to report good progress in this regard. You will be learning more about this platform during this session of the Council in the coming days, and we look forward to transitioning to it in the coming months.
59. During the intersessional period the Secretariat launched a new virtual visit offering. Virtual visits include a look inside OPCW Headquarters and a general presentation about the Convention and the OPCW, followed by a question and answer session. Details about the visit format, including an online booking form, are available on the OPCW website.
60. As we near the end of the destruction of the last declared stockpiles, our focus is evolving to preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons, including their use by non-State actors. In this regard, the Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism met virtually on 8 March under the Chairpersonship of Ambassador Madonsela of South Africa. A representative of INTERPOL briefed the Working Group on its region-by-region threat study on non-State actors and the potential of them using chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive materials.
61. Next year will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention and the founding of the OPCW. This anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the goals of the Convention and the mission of the OPCW. As this milestone approaches, it is clear that the Convention's mandate is enduring, and that the Organisation's relevance is unequivocal.
62. However, it is also clear that the world today is not the same as it was in 1997 when the Convention entered into force. The progress we have made towards ridding the world of chemical weapons has been significant, but the repeated use of chemical weapons puts it under threat. In this polarised environment, it remains the responsibility of all States Parties, with the support of the Secretariat, to pursue every effort to protect, maintain and strengthen the norm against chemical weapons.

63. I can assure you that the Secretariat stands ready to assist you in this regard. You can count on the dedication, independence, and expertise of all the Secretariat staff members to support you in our shared endeavour.
64. Personally, I will continue to work in my usual fashion, impartially and intensely, always implementing the Convention and the decisions of the States Parties, while remaining committed, for the benefit of the Organisation, far from political or other interests.

--- 0 ---