



Opening Remarks by the OPCW Director-General, at the Arms Control Association and Chemical Weapons Convention Coalition Webinar “Reinforcing the Norm Against Chemical Weapons: The April 20-22 Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention”

As delivered on 10 May 2021, The Hague, Netherlands

Directors,
Ambassadors of Canada and Germany,
Dr. Zanders,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to open this event organised by the Arms Control Association and the Chemical Weapons Convention Coalition (CWC Coalition). I wish to thank Dr Walker and the organisers for arranging this meeting in an adapted modality.

The civil society community of nongovernmental organisations, researchers, scientists, and other relevant stakeholders are essential partners in achieving the OPCW’s mission and raising awareness about the risks posed by certain chemicals. The CWC Coalition has played a critical role in this regard by coordinating and supporting civil society’s engagement with the OPCW through the Conference of the States Parties. Civil society has been a champion of the Convention from before its entry into force in 1997.

During the last twenty-four years, the OPCW has delivered concrete and significant results. With 193 States Parties, the treaty covers 98% of the global population. To-date, over 98% of 72,000 metric tonnes of declared chemical weapons stockpiles have been verified as eliminated. Safe and steady destruction continues and the small remaining fraction is on track to be destroyed by 2023. In recognition of the OPCW’s extensive efforts, the Organisation received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013.

Despite this success, in the last decade, the global ban against chemical weapons has come under threat. In recent years, there have been a number of confirmed cases of chemical weapons use in Iraq, Syria, Malaysia, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

In 2021, the OPCW entered its eighth year of engagement in the Syrian Arab Republic. The OPCW has invested a great deal of time and resources in delivering on the mandates given to the Secretariat by the States Parties regarding the Syrian chemical weapons dossier. Three special instruments are used to implement the mandates in that country: the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT).

The Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) continues to address with Syria the shortcomings found in the initial declaration of its chemical weapons programme. So far twenty-four rounds of consultations between the DAT and Syria have taken place. The last one was conducted in February this year. These consultations include high-level exchanges, field visits to sites, sample collection, and interviews with relevant staff connected to the Syrian chemical weapons

programme. After more than 7 years of work of the DAT, Syria's declaration related to its chemical weapons programme is not yet accurate and complete.

The FFM continues to establish facts surrounding allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. To date, the FFM has investigated 77 allegations of chemical weapons use and determined 17 cases of likely or confirmed use of CW in Syria.

The report of the FFM related to the incident in Douma, on 7 April 2018, is still the object of discussion between some Member States. The FFM released its report on 1 March 2019. In its report, the FFM concluded that there were reasonable grounds that the use of chlorine as a weapon likely took place.

Following the issuance of the FFM's report, two former inspectors of the Secretariat tried to portray the work of the OPCW as biased and partial. Here, I would like to highlight that one of the two inspectors was never a member of the FFM, and supported the FFM only for a limited period of time. The other one participated in an FFM investigation for the first time but, only in a limited capacity: he could not be deployed on the field, as he had not completed some of the inspector's trainings. Moreover, after the deployment to Douma, both of them ceased to be involved in the work of the FFM and, consequently, none of them had access to the information and analysis performed by the FFM during the critical period of more than 6 months preceding the conclusion of the FFM's investigation and publication of the report, on the 1 March 2019.

None of the 193 Member States of the OPCW have challenged the findings of the FFM that chlorine was found on the scene of the attack, in Douma. I must recall that the mandate of the FFM is only to establish facts pertaining to the use of toxic chemicals as weapons, not to identify the perpetrators. Several months before the FFM published its report on the Douma incident, the International and Independent Commission of Inquiry of the United Nations, the so-called "Pinheiro Commission", reached the same conclusion as the FFM concerning the presence of a toxic chemical in its investigation of the Douma incident of 7 April 2018.

The above mentioned Commission of Inquiry of the United Nations even went beyond, mentioning the presence of helicopters of the army that dropped cylinders filled with chlorine in Douma on apartment buildings. Nobody contested these conclusions either, while they go beyond those of the FFM by pointing at helicopters. Three years after the events in Douma, I stand by the conclusions of the FFM, as I do about all the reports produced by the Secretariat of the OPCW.

The Conference of the States Parties of the OPCW decided in 2018 to mandate the Secretariat to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons use in Syria. The Investigation and Identification Team, the IIT, was created in 2018, to implement this mandate.

On 8 April 2020, the Secretariat released the first report of the IIT. The report concluded, that there are reasonable grounds to believe that individuals belonging to the Syrian Arab Air Force, used chemical weapons in Ltamenah on three occasions in March 2017. Sarin was used twice, and chlorine in one of the attacks.

Following the issuance of the first IIT report, the Executive Council of the OPCW in July 2020, requested the Syrian Arab Republic to declare to the Secretariat, within 90 days, the chemical weapons used in the attacks in Ltamenah. Under that decision, Syria was also requested to

declare all the chemical weapons it currently possesses, and to resolve all the outstanding issues regarding its initial declaration.

On 12 April 2021, the IIT issued a second report, on the incident that took place in Saraqib, Syria, in February 2018. The report reached the conclusion that there are reasonable grounds to believe that a military helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force hit Saraqib by dropping at least one cylinder of chlorine.

In April 2021, the Conference of the States Parties of the OPCW suspended the rights of Syria:

- to vote in the Conference and the Council;
- to stand for election to the Council; and
- to hold any office of the Conference, the Council, or any subsidiary organs.

Unfortunately, chemical weapons have also been used recently in other parts of the world. In 2018, a chemical of the family of Novichok was used as a weapon in Salisbury, and in Amesbury, in the United Kingdom. Five individuals were directly poisoned, one of whom fatally.

The Secretariat dispatched a team of experts at the request of the United Kingdom and, working independently, confirmed the findings of the United Kingdom regarding the chemical formula of the nerve agent used.

Following these events, the Conference of the States Parties decided to include new chemicals in the list of the most dangerous chemicals of the Organisation called the Schedule 1. It was the first time that this list was amended since the entry into force of the Convention.

On 20 August, last year, a Russian citizen and political activist, Mr Alexei Navalny, was poisoned in Russia. In response to a request from Germany, a team of experts from the Secretariat independently collected in Berlin biomedical samples from Mr Navalny, with his consent, for analysis by OPCW designated laboratories. The results of the analysis confirmed that traces of a chemical of the Novichok family were found in Mr Navalny's blood, with similar structural characteristics as the toxic chemicals that were added to the above mentioned list called Schedule 1.

On 6 October, the Secretariat received a request from the Russian Federation for a technical assistance visit concerning the same incident. All information related to this request was made available on the OPCW public website. As the request did not meet the necessary requirements for the Secretariat to assist Russia in a way similar to other States Parties, the visit did not take place.

The destruction of the declared chemical weapons will come to an end soon, but the threat is still there. It will require heightened and sustained vigilance against the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

The project to build a new Centre for Chemistry and Technology, or ChemTech Centre, is progressing well. The Centre will be a leader in international cooperation, research, analysis, training, and capacity building. 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.

The funding target for the construction of the ChemTech Centre has now been met, but the Trust Fund remains open for further contributions, to finance certain equipment and programmes. I would like to express my appreciation to all the donors whose contributions have enabled this significant achievement.

The ChemTech Centre construction is currently planned to be achieved at the end of 2022. We are preparing a dossier of priority programmes to be carried out in the Centre since the beginning, and I have started informal consultations with States Parties to incorporate their priorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we countdown to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Organisation in 2022, we need to acknowledge that our world today is very different to the one in 1997 when the OPCW was founded. To meet challenges, it is imperative for us to keep adapting and evolving in an ever-changing global landscape. Preventing re-emergence will require the commitment and efforts of all stakeholders: civil society, governments and industry.
