



Statement by the OPCW Director-General, at the United Nations Security Council

As delivered on 3 June 2021, The Hague, Netherlands

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Madam Under-Secretary General, High-Representative for Disarmament,

I thank the Estonian Presidency of the Security Council for giving me this opportunity to inform you about developments at the OPCW since my last appearance in the Council, on 11 December last year, when I engaged in a comprehensive exchange with you at the invitation of the South African Presidency.

It has been over 10 years that the Syrian people have suffered from war. You are well aware of this. Amongst the atrocities of the war, the grim record of this conflict includes chemical weapons use. Chemical weapons have been used in the Syrian Arab Republic both before and after its accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013. These well-documented and repeated uses have taken place despite the successful destruction of over 1300 tons of declared Syrian stockpiles under stringent OPCW verification measures.

One of the deadliest attacks took place in Khan Shaykhoun, on the 4th April 2017, involving the use of sarin and leaving several dozens of casualties and over 500 injured. Before that, the Syrian Arab Republic acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention in September 2013, one month after the sarin attack in Ghouta that claimed several hundreds of lives, investigated by a United Nations Mission. Since then, the OPCW Secretariat has been providing ample information to the Conference of the States Parties and the Executive Council of the OPCW, as well as to the Security Council, through the United Nations Secretary General, and through monthly reports and direct briefings by myself.

It is a disturbing reality that, eight years down the path, the Syrian chemical weapons dossier remains far from closed. I will now provide you with an update on developments related to the Syrian dossier.

On 12 April 2021, in line with its mandate to identify the perpetrators of use of chemical weapons in Syria, the second report of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) was issued. In this report, the IIT concluded, on the basis of all the information obtained and analysed, that there are reasonable grounds to believe that at approximately 21:22hrs on 4 February 2018, during ongoing attacks against Saraqib, a military helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force, under the control of the Tiger Forces, 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.

This established case of chemical weapons use by the Syrian Air Force adds on to the three other cases identified in the first IIT report of April 2020, and presented to you in detail during my briefing to this Council on 12 May 2020. Let me therefore just recall that, in its

first report, the IIT had concluded that there were reasonable grounds to believe, that the perpetrators of use of a chemical weapon in Ltamenah, on 24, 25 and 30 March 2017, were individuals belonging to the Syrian Arab Air Force that used sarin on two occasions and chlorine on one occasion. After the publication of these two reports, in 2020 and 2021, the IIT continues its investigations on cases of use or likely use of chemical weapons. Currently, five cases are being investigated. The IIT will report on them in due course.

On 21 April 2021, the Conference of the States Parties -193 States are members of the OPCW- decided to express grave concern at the proven cases of chemical weapons use in Syria that contravene the provisions of the Convention. It also decided to deprive Syria of the following rights and privileges:

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

Through its decision, the Conference of the States Parties of the OPCW requested the Director-General to regularly report to the OPCW Executive Council on whether Syria has completed the following measures that it had failed to fulfil so far:

1. declare to the Secretariat the facilities where the chemical weapons, (including precursors, munitions, and devices,) used in the 24, 25, and 30 March 2017 attacks in Ltamenah were developed, produced, stockpiled, and operationally stored for delivery;
2. declare to the Secretariat all of the chemical weapons it currently possesses, (including sarin, sarin precursors, and chlorine that is not intended for purposes not prohibited under the Convention), as well as chemical weapons production facilities, and other related facilities; and
3. resolve all of the outstanding issues, regarding its initial declaration of its chemical weapons stockpile and programme.

Once I have reported that all those measures have been completed, Syrian rights under the Convention will be reinstated.

Mr. Chairman,

Over the years, both, the Policy-Making Organs of the OPCW and the United Nations Security Council have been calling for an end to impunity for chemical weapons use, and for the perpetrators to be held accountable. The Security Council resolutions 2118(2013), 2209(2015) and 2235(2015) all contain this strong message. The United Nations Secretary General also supported this call in several of his statements, by underlining that accountability is an essential part of deterrence against the use of chemical weapons.

The OPCW, including the IIT as part of the Secretariat, is neither a court, nor a tribunal. Neither was the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism established by this Council in 2015 and discontinued in 2017. Through its work, however, the OPCW provides the international community with materials that will assist accountability mechanisms in their tasks. As mandated by the Conference of the States Parties in 2018, the Secretariat has

continued the transfer of information to the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), established by a Resolution of the General Assembly in 2016, to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Crimes committed in Syria since March 2011.

Mr. Chairman,

It should be recalled that all the mandates given through the Convention and decisions by the OPCW Conference of the States Parties and Executive Council concerning the Syrian chemical dossier remain binding on all States Parties, and also on the Secretariat. Our work therefore continues on multiple fronts, including through engagement with Syria.

The Fact-Finding Mission 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 use or likely use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The report of the FFM related to the incident in Douma that took place on 7 April 2018 is still a matter of interest for some Member States, including here at the Security Council. Let me recall the facts. The FFM released its report on 1 March 2019. In this report, the FFM concluded that there were reasonable grounds that the use of chlorine as a weapon likely took place in Douma.

Following the issuance of the FFM's report, two former inspectors of the Secretariat could not accept that the conclusions of the FFM were different from their own personal views, views that were not backed by evidence. When their opinions could not gain traction within the Secretariat, they tried to publicly portray the work of the OPCW as biased, partial, and that somehow the FFM report would have been doctored. By doing so, they violated all their fundamental obligations towards the OPCW and its Member States.

I would like to highlight that one of the two former inspectors was never a member of the FFM, and had only a supporting task to the FFM 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, in the summer of 2018, both of them ceased to be involved in the work of the FFM and, consequently, none of them had access to the critical information and analysis performed by the FFM, from end of August 2018, during the period of more than 6 months preceding the conclusion of the FFM's investigation and publication of the report, on 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 solely to establish facts pertaining to the use of toxic chemicals as weapons, not to identify the perpetrators. Since 1 March 2019, the report of the FFM about Douma is under the authority of the Executive Council, and the Conference of the States Parties, and it will be further examined by the IIT.

The Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) continues its efforts to clarify the shortcomings found in the Syrian initial declaration. One new issue was recently opened and will be taken up during the 25th round of consultation we are preparing. It pertains to the presence of a neat

chemical weapons agent found in samples collected in large storage containers in September 2020.

On 30 April, I sent a letter to the Syrian National Authority, announcing that the next round of consultations would take place between 18 May and 1 June. On 5 May, the Secretariat requested the necessary and usual issuance of visas for the team members. In the absence of a response, the Secretariat informed the Syrian authorities on 14 May of the postponement of the mission to 28 May. On 26 May, still not having received any response from the Syrian authorities on the issuance of visas, I decided to postpone the mission until further notice. The Secretariat will continue to seek the next opportunity to deploy the DAT in order to support the Syrian Arab Republic in complying with all its obligations under the Convention, the decisions of the OPCW Policy-Making Organs, and the resolutions of the Security Council.

The bi-annual inspections at the Syrian Scientific Research Centre continue. The Secretariat also continues to prepare for inspections of the Syrian airbases identified in the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism reports and in the IIT reports as having been involved in the use of chemical weapons. These inspections will take place as soon as both the security conditions and evolution of COVID-19 will allow.

I wish to stress at this point that the Secretariat continues to deliver on all the diverse Syria-related mandates in extraordinarily difficult conditions such as:

- numerous and sophisticated cyber-attacks it suffers;
- the massive spread of disinformation about our work and sometimes even denigration of some staff members; and,
- over the last year, the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am constantly heartened by the determination and courage of my staff in such challenging circumstances, displayed especially during deployments that we still manage to materialise, regardless of all the obstacles.

Mr. Chairman,

Along with the Syrian chemical weapons dossier, there is a number of important matters related to chemical weapons that also require attention. As I reported to you previously, chemical weapons have also been used in the last seven years in Malaysia, Iraq, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. Many of these cases of use involved highly sophisticated chemical agents and had to be tackled with expertise and competence. The OPCW Secretariat has delivered assistance upon the request of concerned States Parties.

It is the responsibility of the international community at large, at the OPCW and beyond, to take further steps. We must also take into account that despite its almost universal reach, there are still four States, members of the United Nations, which have not ratified or acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention. Should any of those States join the Convention as a possessor State in the years to come, another operation of elimination of chemical weapons stockpiles of such possessor State, under OPCW verification, would be set in motion.

All these matters, together with the evolution of the global security environment, and the progress of science and technology, require the Secretariat's full preparedness in terms of knowledge, skills and capacity:

- We need to stay abreast of scientific and technological developments;
- The unique knowledge on chemical weapons that we presently possess must be preserved and retained;
- Our staff must be able to further develop skills and expertise, so as to be able to assist States Parties in facing all kinds of chemical threats;
- The Secretariat will continue to actively promote chemical security culture in all States Parties to counter the threat of chemical terrorism;

To this end, and despite that our budget is subject to zero nominal growth, we continue to progress on all those essential aspects of our work.

The new Centre for Chemistry and Technology, (the ChemTech Centre) that we are building in the Netherlands, will be a key tool at our disposal. It will empower us to better address the emerging chemical weapons threats and to contribute to the use of chemistry only for the benefit of humankind. The ChemTech Centre will function as a repository of knowledge and skills pertaining to chemical disarmament, non-proliferation, chemical security and safety, and peaceful uses of chemistry.

It will also contribute to the exchange and acquisition of expertise and skills necessary to stay at the forefront of scientific and technological developments. It will be a global forum for chemical research and analysis, enabling the Member States to establish networks of experts, researchers and laboratories, through a wide range of activities. The construction of the ChemTech Centre, that is starting now, is currently planned to be achieved at the end of 2022.

Mr. Chairman,

In the coming two years, the Organisation is preparing to reach two other important milestones: the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Organisation in 2022 and the end of the destruction of all declared chemical weapons stockpiles, which is expected to be completed by 2023.

Keeping the world secure from re-emergence of chemical weapons requires the commitment and efforts of a full range of stakeholders: governments, parliaments, chemical industry, international organisations and bodies, academia, the scientific community and not least, the civil society. I take it as an integral part of my duties to reach out to and communicate with representatives of all those stakeholders, including United Nations partners and the members of this Council.

I wish to conclude by paying tribute to the unwavering commitment and support of all those valuable partners to our work. We would not succeed without them.

Thank you for your attention.
