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FRANCE

**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR LUIS VASSY
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC TO THE OPCW
AT THE TWENTY-SIXTH SESSION
OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE STATES PARTIES**

Mr Chairperson,
Mr Director-General,
Distinguished Ambassadors,
Dear friends,

France aligns itself with the statement of the European Union. Allow me to add the following remarks in my national capacity.

Mr Chairperson, allow me first to congratulate you on your election as Chairperson of the Conference of the States Parties (“the Conference”). The French delegation has full confidence in you to successfully lead our work during this Twenty-Sixth Session.

Believe me, I wish that I did not have to address this topic today. But if the Syrian chemical dossier remains at the very core of our Organisation’s concerns more than eight years after Syria’s accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (“the Convention”), it is precisely because chemical weapons have continued to be used by one of its Member States. Some may dare to say that this statement is politically motivated. However, what this is really and singularly about is compliance with the Convention—a Convention that we all committed to respect when we signed and ratified it.

This is why I cannot but regret the Syrian regime’s clear refusal to cooperate with the OPCW Technical Secretariat (“the Secretariat”). Far from setting an example in the past, Syria’s lack of cooperation is now blatant and demonstrates a deliberate intent to obstruct the OPCW’s work.

To provide an understanding of this, let me list the worrying obstacles put in place by the Syrian regime, which have hindered the missions of the Secretariat since the adoption of decision C-25/DEC.9 (dated 21 April 2021) by the Conference. Regarding the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), its deployment to Syria has been made impossible since April. Syria has failed to issue the requested visas, and even when it does, it does so late and in piecemeal fashion. We cannot help but wonder why one DAT expert has been denied a visa by Syria, despite having been authorised to travel there more than 20 times in the past. The delay in issuing a visa to the liaison officer in Damascus has also had a significant impact on the preparation of missions planned for this autumn.



Clearly, the Syrian regime does not want to cooperate. This is unacceptable. We recall that this obligation to cooperate is enshrined both in paragraph 7 of Article VII of the Convention, to which Syria has acceded, and in resolution 2118 (2013), which requires Syria to provide OPCW and United Nations personnel with immediate and unfettered access to all sites on its territory deemed relevant.

Still, let us recall once again, the measures resulting from the April decision of the Conference are not irreversible. The rights and privileges that were suspended in April can be reinstated. This requires the regime to comply with its international obligations and to cooperate actively and in good faith with the OPCW, which is continuing its work in full transparency and with great professionalism.

Beyond that, we recall that only a credible, viable, and inclusive political solution in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) can bring an end to the Syrian conflict. While the Convention has been violated by the Syrian regime, which has continued to use chemical weapons against its people since 2013, my country remains fully mobilised in order that an appropriate response be provided, within the framework of the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons or before the relevant national jurisdictions dealing with these matters, so that access to justice can be given the victims.

The chemical nerve agent attack against Mr Alexei Navalny on 20 August 2020 on the territory of the Russian Federation was shocking to us all.

France shares the conclusions of several of its European partners and the Secretariat regarding the facts surrounding poisoning with a military nerve agent of the novichok group. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the shocking and reckless use of such an agent. The use of chemical weapons anywhere, at any time, by anyone, and under any circumstances is unacceptable and contravenes international norms against the use of such weapons. It is imperative that light be shed on the circumstances of this crime and those who perpetrated it, that those responsible be held accountable, and that all measures be taken to prevent the recurrence of such attacks.

It is first and foremost the responsibility of the Russian Federation to initiate a credible and transparent investigation into this criminal act on its territory, against a Russian citizen, by means of a nerve agent from the family of agents developed by Russia. We are still waiting for the Russian Federation to provide credible explanations about this assassination attempt.

As you know, the Permanent Representation of the Russian Federation sent a note verbale to my country through the Secretariat, which was received on 18 October 2021. In accordance with the provisions of paragraph 2 of Article IX of the Convention, France replied within the prescribed time limit, through a note verbale dated 18 October 2021.

Like every year, the Conference will decide on the OPCW Programme and Budget. This is, however, the first biennial budget that will be put before us, allowing for a longer-term vision of the management of the Organisation. France wishes to commend the excellent work by the co-facilitators, Mr Jerzy Gierasimiuk and Mr Matteo Fachinotti, in the run-up to the October session of the Executive Council (“the Council”), which allowed the Council to recommend the adoption of the Draft Programme and Budget for 2022–2023.

In light of the context that we have been experiencing for several years, we have a responsibility to provide the Organisation with the means essential to fulfil its missions, from chemical demilitarisation to the fight against re-emergence, to international cooperation. Consequently, France has decided to make an exception to the zero nominal growth policy applied to budgets of international organisations, and to support the draft budget as recommended by the Council at its Ninety-Eighth Session.

Nevertheless, we would point out that this increase in the level of assessed contributions is not sustainable over the long haul, and must go together with measures of optimisation and streamlining to be undertaken by the Secretariat. We also recall that it is the duty of each State Party to enable the Secretariat to perform its tasks by paying their assessed contributions on time and in full. It is essential that States in arrears comply with their obligations as soon as possible in order to reduce the current deficit. Indeed, States that respect their financial commitments should not bear any undue additional burden.

As recommended by the Council at its October session, France supports the reappointment of the Director-General, Mr Fernando Arias, for a second four-year term. We reiterate our full confidence in him and in all the members of the Secretariat, who work every day to achieve the objective we have set for ourselves—a world forever free of chemical weapons.

My country is fully committed to that end and to the fight against the re-emergence of the use of chemical weapons.

It is in pursuance of these objectives that France contributed nearly EUR 2 million this year to support the OPCW in various areas: activities related to Syria; cybersecurity; the construction of the future ChemTech Centre; and capacity-building activities in Africa. France is indeed determined to invest in the future of the OPCW, whose expertise remains essential to preventing the re-emergence of the use of chemical weapons, including by non-State actors.

France has also been involved since 2019 in the Mentorship/Partnership Programme set up by the OPCW Secretariat. We are convinced that international cooperation will help advance the implementation of the Convention, including through the exchange of best practices between National Authorities.

These are very challenging times. They call for the Organisation to modernise itself, as one of the original objectives of the Convention will soon be fulfilled, while new threats to international security are emerging. It is with this in mind that we look forward to the 2023 Review Conference, whose success depends on our collective responsibility. Because of its inherent deterrent capability, the Convention is one of the greatest success stories in the field of disarmament. It is now up to us to defend it. We owe this to our citizens, whom we have promised to protect from these weapons.

I request that this statement be considered as an official document of this session of the Conference and that it be posted on Catalyst and the official OPCW website.

Thank you.

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