



## **Regional Basic Course on Assistance and Protection Against Chemical Weapons and Emergency Response to Chemical Incidents for States Parties in Asia**

Closing remarks by the Deputy Director-General of the OPCW, Ms Odette Melono

19-23 June 2022

Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this ceremony marking the successful conclusion of the regional Basic assistance and protection course on chemical emergency response to chemical incidents for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region, held this week in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

At the outset, let me first express on behalf of the OPCW our deepest condolences to the government and people of Afghanistan, a member of the SAARC, in the wake of the terrible earthquake yesterday. Our thoughts are with you in this moment of profound grief.

I welcome the State Minister for Disaster Management and Relief of Bangladesh, Dr Enamur Rahman, to this closing ceremony and warmly thank the Government of Bangladesh – especially the National Authority for the Chemical Weapons Convention, as well as the Fire Service and Civil Defense (FSCD), for hosting and co-organising the course.

The basic course forms an integral part of the OPCW annual training cycle designed to assist OPCW Member States to enhance protection capabilities for safeguarding their civilian populations against chemical weapons attacks and other incidents involving the release of toxic chemicals.

The value of training opportunities of this nature at the regional and international level cannot be underestimated. It broadens the pool of experts in national protective programmes, as well as enhancing national, regional, and international level capacity and responsiveness for minimising potential impacts of chemical incidents.

Let me also share some comments and proposals specific to SAARC region.

The SAARC region embodies 21% of the world's population and around 5% of the global economy, a large part of which is the chemical industry, as well as the trade, transport, and storage of toxic chemicals.

Secondly, the region, along with many other parts of the world, is facing new security threats. This includes the threat from attempts by non-state actors to acquire and use toxic chemicals to cause terror, panic, and harm. The security situation in Afghanistan requires particular attention to national protective programmes against chemical emergencies.

Thirdly, I cannot but mention the tragic accidents involving toxic chemicals that take place worldwide, including in this region. The most recent fire at a container depot in Sitakunda, Bangladesh on 4 June 2022 reportedly caused at least 49 deaths (of which 10 were fire-fighters) and left over 250 people injured. It was the industrial chemicals involved that caused such a devastating effect. While we are looking forward to reading the official investigation report, it is already clear that the national preparedness and response to chemical emergencies capabilities need to be strengthened.

The OPCW Director General, Ambassador Fernando Arias, was immediately informed of the accident. He noted that this tragic incident starkly illustrated, I quote: “the need [for] better training and equipment for first responders” end quote. On his behalf I would also want to pass our condolences to the families of the casualties.

In this context, the OPCW stands ready to further work alongside Member States in order to bolster regional co-operation and build up national protective programmes.

The OPCW and Bangladesh have, for several years now, effectively collaborated to implement the Chemical Weapons Convention.

However, there is much more to be done and we hope to extend the cooperation between the OPCW and the Government of Bangladesh and other States Parties in the region under Article X of the convention.

The Secretariat has two specific proposals in this regard.

First, we'd like to suggest that Bangladesh consider hosting a sub-regional advanced course and exercise in 2023. The Secretariat can offer technical assistance, including equipment and expertise, to Bangladesh's National Authority. We look forward to building a full sub-regional training cycle together with the OPCW training partner centres in the SAARC region.

Second, we stand ready to develop a tailor-made approach to strengthening national and regional risk assessments, and relevant preparedness and response capacities and capabilities. This week the participants had a chance using the On-line Self-Assessment Tool (or "OSAT programme"), designed by the OPCW to support the risk assessment based national action plans aimed at strengthening the corresponding protective programmes.

All States Parties in the region are invited to use and benefit from the OSAT Programme.

Distinguished participants,

Your work as first responders is an important cornerstone of the CWC and its implementation. It serves to protect your citizens from the impact of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals. Just as importantly, through the networks and friendships that you build here, you will be able to extend an ever-broader protective umbrella over our greater community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW, allow me to once again express my sincere appreciation to the Bangladesh National Authority for hosting this event.

Thank you also to the instructors – we gathered a fantastic team for you this week consisting of the most skilled OPCW specialists, national instructors trained by the OPCW and an expert from Pakistan as part of the Instructor Exchange Programme.

Finally, let me close by wishing all course participants the very best in their common endeavours to respond to the use of chemical weapons.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>i</sup> SAARC was founded in Dhaka in 1985. Comprises of eight Member States: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Constitutes 21% of the world's population and 5.21% (USD 4.47 trillion) of the global economy, as of 2021. HQ is based in Katmandu, Nepal.

SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC-IU) has been set up at Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management (GIDM) Campus, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India. It is entrusted with the responsibility of serving Member States by providing policy advice, technical support on system development, capacity building services and training for holistic management of disaster risk in the SAARC region. The centre also facilitates exchange of information and expertise for effective and efficient management of disaster risk.