



STATEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
BY H.E. AMBASSADOR JOHANNES OLJELUND
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF SWEDEN TO THE OPCW
AT THE 102nd SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
(The Hague, 14 - 17 March 2023)

Agenda item 5: General debate

I have the honour of speaking on behalf of the European Union (EU).

The Candidate Countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Ukraine, as well as the EFTA (European Free Trade Association) countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the EEA (European Economic Area) align themselves with this statement. Andorra, Monaco and San Marino also associate themselves with this statement.

The European Union would like to thank the Chairperson, H.E. Ambassador Ziad Al Atiyah of Saudi Arabia, for guiding the preparatory work for this 102nd Session of the Executive Council in a dedicated and effective manner. I would like to assure him of our continued support in steering the work of the Council.

The European Union reiterates its full support to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and underlines the complementarity of its work with the United Nations. This was also highlighted by the UN General Assembly Resolution on the Cooperation between the UN and the OPCW, which was sponsored by the Netherlands and adopted on 20 February 2023.

We also take this opportunity to commend the leadership of OPCW Director General, Ambassador Fernando Arias, and reiterate our full confidence in the OPCW Technical Secretariat (TS), its professionalism, impartiality and well-established technical expertise in implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and tasks assigned by the States Parties.

Mr. Chairperson,

The European Union welcomes the release of the third report of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) to the Executive Council of OPCW and to the Secretary General of the United Nations on 27 January 2023. The report concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that on April 7, 2018 at least one Mi-8/17 helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force, operating under the control of the Tiger Forces, dropped two yellow cylinders which hit two residential buildings in a central area of the city, releasing chlorine killing 43 named individuals and affecting dozens more.

This attack represents the ninth case of chemical weapons use that has been independently attributed to the Syrian regime by the UN and the OPCW. The European Union condemns in the strongest possible terms the Syrian regime's repeated use of these horrific weapons and remains steadfast in demanding that the Syrian regime immediately comply with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Syria must fully declare and destroy its chemical weapons program and allow the unfettered access of OPCW staff to verify it has done so, in accordance with its obligations under UN Resolution 2118 and the CWC.

We also call on the Russian Federation to stop shielding the Syrian regime from accountability for its use of chemical weapons, including through campaigns of disinformation.

The use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, at any time and under any circumstances is a violation of international law and can amount to the most serious of international crimes - war crimes and crimes against humanity. Those identified as responsible for these reprehensible crimes must and will be held accountable. The Investigation and Identification Team's professional reporting is a crucial contribution to efforts to end impunity for the use of chemical weapons. We look forward to the continuation of the work of the IIT and the release of its next reports, and we are determined to ensure full follow up of all findings.

The European Union and its Member States will continue to work on national and international levels addressing chemical weapons attacks and other atrocity crimes committed by the Syrian regime, consistent with its commitment to the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons. The European Union has imposed restrictive measures on 36 high-level Syrian officials and scientists as well as three entities for their role in the development and use of chemical weapons and is ready to consider introducing further measures as appropriate.

Mr. Chairperson,

The European Union reiterates its resolute condemnation of Russia's unjustifiable, unprovoked and illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the UN Charter obligations and OSCE principles and commitments. Russia's brutal war, which has lasted a full year, has brought immense suffering and destruction to Ukraine and its people. We resolutely support Ukraine, the victim of Russia's unprovoked aggression, in its inherent right to self-defence in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. We urge Russia to stop its war of aggression and to immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all its troops and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders. We welcome the Secretariat's work in providing equipment and training to Ukraine in order to assist them with their readiness and preparedness to respond to a potential chemical weapons attack. Russia bears the full responsibility for this act of aggression and all the destruction and loss of life it causes. It will be held accountable for its actions.

Mr. Chairperson,

Addressing the threat of chemical weapons use lies at the core of the Convention and is essential for upholding international legal norms. The European Union reiterates its strong concerns that the Russian Federation has not reacted to international calls for a thorough and transparent investigation into the assassination attempt on the Russian opposition politician Mr. Alexei Navalny. The poisoning of Mr. Navalny in Russia in August 2020 by a nerve agent of the "Novichok" group (a substance developed by Russia), has been confirmed, beyond doubt, by specialised laboratories in Germany, France and Sweden, as well as by the OPCW.

The European Union has condemned this poisoning in the strongest possible terms and sanctioned 14 Russian government officials and a state research institute linked to the assassination attempt. We once again urge the Russian Federation to provide substantial answers to the questions posed by 45 States Parties in the framework of Art. IX, paragraph 2 of the Convention on 5 October 2021, and to disclose without further delay the circumstances of the assassination attempt against Mr. Navalny.

Mr. Chairperson,

The Fifth Review Conference will be an opportunity to review the implementation of the Convention and consider how to strengthen the Convention as a key instrument of the international non-proliferation and disarmament regime. Achieving a common vision on countering the re-emergence of chemical weapons and safeguarding the global non-use norm is a shared responsibility of all States Parties.

The European Union has formally set out its positions for the Fifth Review Conference. EU Council Conclusions with a view to the Fifth CWC Review Conference were adopted by the EU's Foreign Ministers on 20 February 2023. They outline the EU's key overall objectives for the Conference and our contribution for the drafting of the Outcome Document. It has already been shared with States Parties through Catalyst.

The European Union and its Member States will continue to contribute constructively to the substantive work of the Open Ended Working Group (OEWG). We are pleased that regional groups and States Parties actively express their expectations and priorities regarding the variety of topics at stake for the future. The thematic approach has proven essential to capturing the issues at stake in a comprehensive manner. In this context, we would like to express our gratitude to the Chairperson, Ambassador Lauri Kuusing of Estonia, for leading the work of the OEWG in an open and inclusive manner, with the goal of building consensus.

Mr. Chairperson,

The European Union notes with great concern that the Technical Secretariat will face a high turnover in the Inspectorate Division in 2023 which will affect its operational capacity. The situation underlines the urgent need for amending the OPCW Tenure Policy in the context of the Fifth Review Conference with a view to improving the Technical Secretariat's ability to maintain key expertise required to ensure the continued implementation of the Convention.

The European Union commends the Director-General for progress made towards a more gender-balanced, diverse and representative Technical Secretariat. We look forward to further progress towards gender equality in the Organisation, including through the enhancement of gender mainstreaming in all areas of the Technical Secretariat's work. We underline the importance of the swift implementation of the recommendations of the Gender and Diversity Audit, and encourage the timely sharing of results with States Parties on this implementation. The Fifth Review Conference represents an important opportunity in this regard, and we welcome the widespread and cross regional support for further progress in the area of gender and the CWC as articulated by many States Parties during the OEWG process.

In response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Germany launched an initiative on Executive Council business continuity in July 2020. The aim is to ensure the continued functioning of this Policy Making Organ under emergency circumstances. It would allow the Executive Council to convene at alternative venues or through virtual meeting technology, if the need arises. Two and half years of numerous and thorough consultations have led to a broad consensus on the respective draft text. The European Union strongly encourages all members of the OPCW Executive Council to support the adoption of the decision at this session.

Mr. Chairperson,

Finally, I would like to reiterate the importance of engaging all relevant stakeholders, ranging from chemical industry to think tanks, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, in the OPCW work. In this spirit, the European Union encourages to find ways and means for ensuring their meaningful and broadest possible participation in the Conference of States Parties, including the Fifth Review Conference.

I would kindly ask you to consider this statement as an official document and post it on the OPCW external server and public website.

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