

UK Draft National Statement: EC103, July 2023

Chair, distinguished delegates,

The United Nations Secretary-General told us at the Review Conference in May that the Chemical Weapons Convention has helped create a safer world for us all. Yet, with chemical weapons attacks taking place in recent times, each use threatens to reverse our hard-won gains. He added that “in the name of the victims of these attacks — and as a deterrent to future chemical warfare — those responsible for any use must be identified and held accountable for their crimes.” The United Kingdom wholeheartedly agrees. We call upon all States Parties to uphold the Convention and to strengthen the Organisation, including the Technical Secretariat.

Meticulous investigations have documented repeated uses of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, years after Syria claimed to have destroyed all its stockpiles. Denials and disinformation from the Assad regime and its Russian backers cannot disguise Syria’s failure to cooperate with the Technical Secretariat or to fulfil its wider commitments under the Convention. 20 issues remain outstanding with Syria’s initial declaration, almost a decade since it was made. The Syrian authorities have not accepted responsibility or acknowledged any need for accountability. Without meaningful progress from Syria, its chemical weapons programme will continue to pose a threat to international security.

This is sadly familiar, but we should not hold back from acting in response. The OPCW’s work in Syria is important for the Convention as a whole: if we do not implement it here, we risk weakening the overall regime. The United Kingdom encourages all states, whatever their wider relationships may be, to insist that Syria respect the rules that apply to all States Parties. We would welcome wide support for

further steps at the OPCW to condemn past chemical weapons attacks in Syria, support accountability, resolve outstanding issues and reduce security risks.

Given Russia's track record of chemical weapons use, there has long been concern that it could use chemical weapons in its unjustified and illegal invasion of Ukraine. Dawn Sturgess tragically died in the United Kingdom five years ago this week after exposure to a Russian novichok nerve agent. Alexey Navalny was poisoned with a novichok nerve agent in Russia two years later.

Any use of chemical weapons by Russia in Ukraine would have severe consequences. We recall the Chemical Weapons Convention's prohibition on the use of riot control agents as a method of warfare. The United Kingdom supports Ukraine's efforts to protect itself against the threat of chemical weapons and to investigate possible use, noting the options set out in the Convention and in decisions of the policy-making organs.

At the recent Review Conference, the vast majority of states parties demonstrated their continued commitment to a positive future agenda for the OPCW, and their confidence in the Technical Secretariat. We are clear-eyed about those states that blocked consensus and their reasons for doing so.

We recognise that organisational governance issues concerning the Technical Secretariat form an important part of the future agenda. This includes geographic and other forms of diversity, tenure policy and the budget, as well as well-designed programming and the opportunities presented by the new ChemTech Centre. The United Kingdom looks forward to further discussion on these issues.

The United Kingdom is proud to work with partners to implement the Convention and move closer to our shared objective of a world free from chemical weapons.