



OPCW

Executive Council

102nd Session
14 – 17 March 2023

EC-102/NAT.22
14 March 2023
ENGLISH and FRENCH only

SWITZERLAND

**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR HEINZ WALKER-NEDERKOORN
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SWISS CONFEDERATION TO THE
OPCW AT THE 102ND SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Mr Chairperson,

Over the past decade, obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention have been repeatedly violated in Syria. The third report of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), which examined the attack in Douma in April 2018, concludes that there are “reasonable grounds to believe” that the perpetrators of this attack were members of the Air Force of the Syrian Arab Republic at the time of the incident. Thus, to date, nine of the approximately 25 chemical attacks documented by the United Nations and the OPCW in Syria have been attributed to the Syrian Government.

Switzerland fully supports the conclusion of this report, which was prepared in an impartial, objective, and independent manner by reviewing all available information. We have complete confidence in the work of the OPCW, including the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), and the IIT. There is no doubt that their work was conducted with professionalism and integrity. Further, no questions exist about the legality and legitimacy of the IIT’s mandate. Nothing in the Convention precludes the Organisation from taking an attributive role.

Switzerland condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, and under any circumstances. Their use constitutes a serious violation of international law, and in particular of the Convention. Those responsible must be brought to justice. Impunity for these crimes is simply unacceptable. The victims of these abhorrent crimes deserve justice.

It is concerning that the Syrian Arab Republic is also in violation of other obligations under the Convention. Currently, there are still 20 out of 24 issues outstanding in regard to the initial declaration by Syria. These are not merely details. The absence of verifiable answers and documentation about important elements of the Syrian chemical weapons programme raises serious doubts and concerns about the current status of the programme. We welcome the visit by a reduced team of the DAT that took place in January in Syria. This visit is hopefully a first step towards the full cooperation of the Syrian authorities with the DAT to resolve the outstanding issues. Considering the fact that in almost 10 years only four issues have been resolved, Switzerland urges Syria to comply with its obligations as a State Party to the Convention and to allow the DAT unhindered access to its territory so that it can carry out the necessary investigations and verifications.



With regard to the documented poisoning of Mr Navalny in 2020, there are also outstanding questions. Russia has not initiated an independent investigation nor cooperated with the OPCW, although it is obligated to do so under the Convention. According to credible findings, the British authorities have established that Russia is responsible for the 2018 attack on Sergei Skripal with a nerve agent of the Novichok group. Moreover, Russia denies the repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian armed forces, despite the fact that numerous independent international investigations by the United Nations and the OPCW have provided convincing evidence, and in this context actively seeks to undermine the credibility of the OPCW and the international norm against chemical weapons. Finally, Switzerland condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and calls on Russia to immediately de-escalate the situation, to cease all combat operations, and to withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territory without delay.

As mentioned, for example, in the third report of the IIT, the OPCW, its work, and its staff have repeatedly been the target of disinformation campaigns. These are not new, but nonetheless worrying developments that try to undermine the credibility of the OPCW. Therefore, we need to stand together and voice our undivided support for the OPCW and its work. Switzerland has done so in the past, is doing so today, and will continue to do so in the future.

The upcoming Fifth Review Conference gives us the opportunity to discuss this and other pressing matters, to strengthen the norms of the Convention, and to strengthen the Organisation itself. The preparatory work is in full swing, and Switzerland wishes to take this opportunity to once again commend the work of the Chairperson of the Open-Ended Working Group, Ambassador Lauri Kuusing of Estonia, and that of the Technical Secretariat. Their efforts are paving the way for a productive Review Conference with substantive discussions. Switzerland will continue to support this process.

Our working paper presented last September, entitled "A Strengthened CWC", outlines many of the important steps necessary to achieve this goal. Switzerland has repeatedly stressed that a robust verification regime constitutes a powerful deterrent against the use of chemical weapons. Therefore, multiple elements on which the Review Conference should think and act have been proposed. Within the context of international cooperation under Article X, the Review Conference should call on States Parties to provide adequate funding that allows the Secretariat to maintain and strengthen its capacity to respond promptly to a request for assistance under Article X. Additional emphasis should be put on training activities that aim to strengthen regional cooperation and to create networks of regional and subregional training centres, especially in regions where resources are limited.

Before concluding, I wish to add that Switzerland is looking forward to the opening this year of the new Centre for Chemistry and Technology. It is expected to play a critical role in building capacity and effectively combating the use or re-emergence of chemical weapons, and in strengthening the Secretariat's scientific and technological capabilities. To achieve these objectives, we recommend the development of a well-designed, step-by-step approach to integrate the vital verification-related tasks as well as the international cooperation and assistance activities.

Thank you, Mr Chairperson.