

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

STATEMENT BY MALLORY STEWART ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR THE BUREAU OF ARMS CONTROL, DETERRENCE, AND STABILITY, AT THE TWENTY-EIGHTH SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE STATES PARTIES

Mr. Chairperson,
Mr. Director General,
Distinguished Ambassadors and Delegates,

2023 was a momentous year for the Organization. It marked the 30th anniversary of the opening for signature of the Convention and the complete destruction of all the chemical weapons declared by States Parties worldwide. The OPCW inaugurated the Center for Chemistry and Technology (CCT) which will help the Organization stay abreast of rapid progress in science and technology and enhance international cooperation and assistance (ICA) programs. During the Fifth Review Conference, we reflected on past achievements and we set a course for the future of the Convention. On universality, we saw South Sudan reiterate its commitment to joining the CWC.

Yet, as we celebrate these achievements, we cannot ignore the challenges that lie ahead. During the past ten years we saw repeated use of chemical weapons by the Assad Regime, the Russian Federation, and ISIS. In response, we must take concrete actions.

All of us have said before that to deter future CW use, we must hold those responsible for past use to account. If we do not do so, other states and non-state actors may turn to using these terrible weapons themselves. Unfortunately, we have seen this play out with respect to the Assad regime's repeated, confirmed uses of CW. In 2021, the Conference suspended some of Syria's rights and privileges under the Convention in response to its refusal to take corrective action called for by the Executive Council in light of the findings of the first Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) report. Two years later, the situation remains unchanged and, as the Director-General reminds us, ten years after acceding to the CWC, Syria's declaration still cannot be considered accurate or complete.

Now, in January, the IIT found the Syrian Air Force responsible for the deadly April 7, 2018, chlorine attack in Douma; the ninth independently verified instance of CW use by Syria since it joined the Convention.

We have not managed to effectively hold Syria accountable for these repeated confirmed uses, and as we know, non-state actors and even other states are watching. Since the Asad regime's first use of CW, ISIS has used chemical weapons in Iraq and Syria, the DPRK has used CW in an assassination in Malaysia, and Russia has used CW in two separate attempted assassinations in the United Kingdom and in Russia itself.

To uphold the integrity of the Convention, the United States and other concerned States Parties have put forward a draft decision entitled “*Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use and the Threat of Future Use.*” It calls for capacity building for States Parties to address the growing threat from non-state actors; proposes greater transparency regarding the transfer of scheduled chemicals to Syria; and recommends collective measures to address the continuing Syrian chemical weapons threat. We urge Delegations to support it.

Challenges to the Convention also stem directly from Russia’s repeated use of Novichok nerve agents: in 2018 against the Skripals, and in 2020 against Aleksey Navalny. Two years after being asked for clarification on the poisoning of Mr. Navalny - which only Russia had the motive, means, and track record to attempt - Russia has yet to provide any substantive response. We call on Russia to fully declare and dismantle its chemical weapons program as mandated by the Convention.

Russia must also explain its troubling supporting role in Syria. Indeed, in its report on the Douma CW attack, the IIT notes that “*Russian forces were co-located at Dumayr airbase alongside the Tiger Forces,*” the Syrian unit responsible for the attack and with whom Russia maintains a relationship “*of special proximity and close coordination at the operational and tactical level.*”

Russia’s problematic behavior has now expanded to Ukraine. Article I of the CWC prohibits use of riot control agents (RCAs) as a method of warfare. Yet reports shared by our Ukrainian colleagues and aired on Russia’s own State media, suggest Russian armed forces are using RCAs against Ukrainian forces. Asked for clarification on those troubling reports, Russia, unsurprisingly, responded with unsubstantiated counteraccusations. We call on Russia, once again, to immediately and unconditionally withdraw from Ukraine and to comply with its CWC obligations, including refraining from using RCAs as a method of warfare.

Mr. Chairman, understandably, an overwhelming majority of our colleagues in the Eastern European Group (EEG) do not want the Russian Federation to hold a seat in the Executive Council when it has failed to meet its obligations under the Convention and has continued its illegal invasion of another group member. The United States encourages delegations to respect the will of the EEG and support the candidacies of Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine for the Executive Council. The United States agrees with the opinion of the majority of the EEG countries that Moscow’s appalling track record of violating the UN Charter and supporting chemical weapons use makes it unfit for a leadership position in an organization dedicated to the eradication of such weapons.

To meet the challenges brought on by recent use of chemical weapons and the rapid changes in science and technology, the OPCW must have adequate resources. Through a thorough, participative and transparent process, the TS developed a sensible 2024-2025 Programme and Budget that maximizes cost savings and prioritizes spending on core tasks including verification and international cooperation and assistance programs. We urge delegations to support it when it is considered here in the Conference.

Finally, we must continue to build the capacity of States Parties to implement the Convention and find ways to strengthen the OPCW. We applaud the progress of ongoing efforts on tenure flexibility, geographic representation, and gender balance, and on engagement with civil society. We support taking further steps in each of these areas including at this Conference.

Mr. Chairman, the United States commitment to the Convention is not merely rhetorical. We are also actively supporting the OPCW's ICA and Verification branches and will be transferring \$1.3 million to support the CCT's innovative capacity-building and training projects by the end of our fiscal year. This is beyond the \$135,000 of funding previously provided by the United States and allocated to the Junior Professional Officer program. In addition, to help hold the perpetrators of CW use to account, \$400,000 of funding previously provided by the United States has been allocated to the OPCW trust fund for Syria missions since CSP-27 and I am happy to announce today that we intend to provide another \$1.6 million to that fund.

Outside of the OPCW, the United States plans to spend more than \$80 million over the next five years working with international partners to enhance chemical security and prevent, detect, and counter chemical threats worldwide. 2023 has already been a momentous year. We can make it even more so by taking action this week to move us closer to a world free of chemical weapons. Thank you for your attention. I ask that this statement be designated as an official document of this Conference session and posted on both Catalyst and the public website.