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OPENING STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL TO THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AT ITS 105TH SESSION

1. I welcome all delegations to the 105th Session of the Executive Council.
2. This year continues to be marked by a constantly degrading international security and peace environment. The escalation in geopolitical tensions and the threats associated with the misuse of emerging technologies are real. Both have heightened the risk of the re-emergence of chemical weapons.
3. This is the climate in which the Organisation has operated since we entered the so-called post-destruction phase, following completion of the destruction of all declared chemical weapons last year. In such a degraded environment, the OPCW's contribution to a safer and more secure world will be affected by several factors. One is our effort to address new risks and threats, while fulfilling our existing responsibilities. Another is our ability to harness the benefits of technological advancements, to strengthen the OPCW's and States Parties' capacities in preparedness and response to threats.
4. In the intersessional period, the Secretariat has executed its mandated activities with these considerations in mind.
5. Last year, the Conference of the States Parties, during its Twenty-Eighth Session, acknowledged the completion of the destruction of all declared chemical weapons stockpiles, under the Secretariat's verification.
6. But, unfortunately, the task is not over, since the elimination of non-stockpiled chemical weapons, such as abandoned or old chemical weapons, continues.
7. Concerning abandoned chemical weapons (ACW), China and Japan have continued consultations on the excavation, recovery, and destruction of chemical weapons abandoned by Japan on the territory of China. As at 31 January 2024, a total of 88,155 of the 115,520 declared items of ACW on the territory of China had been reported by Japan as destroyed.
8. During the intersessional period, three ACW inspections were completed by the Secretariat at the destruction and storage facility in Haerbaling and the Taiyuan Temporary Trust Storehouse. In addition, in February 2024, a trilateral meeting was conducted during which China, Japan and the Secretariat discussed the progress of the destruction and recovery activities, the plan for 2024, and the Council's upcoming visit to China.
9. Regarding old chemical weapons (OCW), since the last session of the Council the Secretariat conducted two inspections, in France and in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. More OCW inspections are planned later this year.



10. After the complete elimination of all declared stockpiles of chemical weapons, the Secretariat conducted post-destruction activities in the United States of America in the intersessional period. They consisted of four inspections. One inspection was conducted at the Blue Grass Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant related to the disposal of the chemical weapons component wastes. Three additional inspections were conducted to verify the closure of three chemical weapons destruction facilities, which had previously been used for the destruction of the stockpiled chemical weapons.
11. Furthermore, the Secretariat is intensifying its efforts to preserve the knowledge acquired during the destruction of the declared chemical weapons in various countries. This will allow the Secretariat to continue to develop its expertise and maintain its preparedness, should a possessor State join the Convention. As part of this critical knowledge retention and transfer process, the Secretariat will conduct its first verification and destruction workshop (Articles V and VI) in 2024, at the OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology (ChemTech Centre).
12. I am pleased to brief the Council on the significant developments that have been realised at the ChemTech Centre for the benefit of verification activities. The Laboratory at the ChemTech Centre is now fully operational. Since our last session, an inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) device was installed at the ChemTech Centre's Laboratory. This instrument will play a pivotal role in the chemical forensics research programme, and contribute to the work of non-routine missions.
13. In addition, the Laboratory is preparing the first trial OPCW Biotoxins Proficiency Test, scheduled for August 2024 at the ChemTech Centre. This trial will facilitate the transition from the biotoxin analysis exercises, which were held over the past several years, to an official OPCW proficiency test in the near future.
14. In 2023, the Secretariat managed to complete 98% of the inspection plan related to industry inspections, despite certain operational constraints outside its control. The inspections carried out included all planned inspections of Schedule 1 facilities and Schedule 2 plant sites. I commend those States Parties that constructively engaged with the Secretariat to conduct its inspections in the most effective and cost-efficient manner. With further efforts from all sides, the Secretariat is aiming to complete 100% of the 2024 inspection plan.
15. The Secretariat has already begun working with relevant States Parties to meet the planned target of 200 industry inspections. Since January 2024, four Schedule 1 inspections, 14 Schedule 2, and 12 other chemical production facility inspections have taken place in 13 States Parties in line with the 2024 inspection plan.
16. I note that discussions continue within the Industry Cluster concerning a range of Article VI matters, including the backlog of Schedule 2 inspections.
17. Alongside our inspections of the chemical industry, we have utilised the capabilities of the ChemTech Centre to conduct inspector training. In the intersessional period, 18 training courses comprising over 1,100 training days took place. Ten of these were conducted at the ChemTech Centre, for 300 training days, on topics such as reconnaissance, sampling, mock inspections, non-destructive evaluation, as well as chemical analysis in the mobile laboratory for sampling and analysis inspections. The training has benefited from the significant new and expanded spaces of the ChemTech Centre's indoor and outdoor training areas, chemistry training laboratory, classrooms, and evaluation training rooms.

18. Another priority this year is the expansion of our international cooperation support to States Parties in the areas of national implementation and assistance and protection. Since the Council's last session, the Secretariat has conducted 30 capacity-building events, for 808 participants from all geographical regions. As with trainings organised, we have leveraged the capabilities of the ChemTech Centre in delivering these activities.
19. Moreover, the Secretariat is complementing traditional training and outreach activities with state-of-the-art virtual and remote learning tools to enhance the efficiency of our capacity-building activities. Since January of this year, modernised and expanded e-learning content on the implementation of the Convention has been made available to States Parties through the OPCW Learning Management System on our website. So far, 400 users have enrolled in this new remote learning programme. I seize this opportunity to also highlight the record participation in the Twenty-Fifth Annual Meeting of National Authorities, held at the OPCW Headquarters from 22 to 24 November 2023. It was attended by 200 participants from all regional groups.
20. The potential of the ChemTech Centre is high and continues to be developed. We will continue to propose and expand activities in line with the Programme and Budget. We face this task as a responsibility on us all to deliver and exploit this new and essential instrument.
21. Alongside these existing mandates, the Secretariat is developing its framework for confronting the threats and taking advantage of emerging technologies.
22. At the Council's last session, I highlighted some of the possible practical advantages of artificial intelligence (AI) in strengthening the implementation of the Convention. I also referred to its risks, especially in relation to the re-emergence of chemical weapons. AI has become a powerful technology that is increasingly being integrated into many disciplines and fields, including chemistry, biotechnology, robotics, and drones. The resulting synergies can greatly boost capabilities beyond what each technology can achieve in isolation.
23. The Secretariat is analysing the steps to be taken in response to the impacts that AI has on the OPCW's ability to implement the Convention. The initial focus is on developing an understanding of the risks AI poses in this respect. As part of its exploration phase, the Secretariat is preparing a meeting with external experts who, in a small group, will work on AI with myself and some of the Secretariat staff. The goal will be to share knowledge through a discussion that will assist us in identifying the risks and threats arising from emerging technologies to the object and purpose of the Convention, and to investigate ways to mitigate or neutralise such threats.
24. During the intersessional period, upon the recommendation of the Scientific Advisory Board, I established a new Temporary Working Group on Chemical Forensics, which began its mandate on 1 January. The Temporary Working Group's purpose is to review the science and technology relevant to chemical forensics, with the purpose of enabling the Organisation to maximise the data that chemical forensics can yield.
25. Beyond our assessment of the impact of AI on our mandates, we are concentrating on the specific areas that States Parties identified during the Fifth Review Conference.

26. One such area is the verification regime. At the last session of the Conference, and in my meetings with officials from States Parties in the Netherlands and in some capitals, I mentioned that AI can rapidly generate the formulas for a large number of new toxic substances, increasing the possibilities to create chemical weapons in a faster way. This carries the risk of undermining the existing verification regime by rendering obsolete the content of the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention, and in so doing also threatening the object and purpose of the Convention itself. We must bear in mind that tests have been carried out to develop new toxic substances with AI-based software. The results we know have been disturbing, because thousands of toxic chemical structures were identified by the software in a few hours.
27. Along these same lines is the risk of the misuse of dangerous chemicals by non-State actors. The ease of access to emerging technologies, including unmanned platforms, coupled with their relatively low cost, heightens this danger.
28. The Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism, chaired by Ambassador Vusimuzi Madonsela of South Africa, remains a valuable platform for all States Parties to engage on ways to address this threat. At its meeting on 26 February, the Group considered the outcomes of the table-top exercise conducted at the ChemTech Centre last November, and how these should inform its future activities. I thank all of you for your participation in this important Working Group.
29. In addressing all of these priorities, the ChemTech Centre is at the disposal of States Parties. Since the Centre became operational last year, we have conducted a wide range of activities on inspectorate training, laboratory exercises, proficiency testing, and international cooperation. More than 700 external participants from all geographical regions have benefited.
30. Going forward, the Secretariat will count on the support of States Parties in providing the additional extrabudgetary resources required to optimise the use of the Centre.
31. During the last session of the Conference of the States Parties we announced that a new trust fund had been established to finance some activities to be undertaken at the Centre. I encourage States Parties in a position to do so to contribute to this common endeavour. Additionally, I have instructed the relevant staff to strengthen our capacity to leverage voluntary contributions by streamlining our trust funds, inter alia, through more access to co-financing.
32. In addition to the tools and platforms available to us in this post-destruction era, the Organisation will continue to strengthen its partnerships. The increase in the common threats we face requires collective and cooperative action. The ChemTech Centre increases opportunities for deepening partnerships with scientists, academia, and other experts.
33. In this vein, I welcome the discussions among States Parties on advancing engagement with civil society, led by Ambassador Andrés Terán Parral of Ecuador and Ambassador Thomas Schieb of Germany. This initiative follows on from the Fifth Review Conference and the continued emphasis that States Parties have placed on leveraging opportunities and expertise offered by external stakeholders.

34. The European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the Commission and I signed a memorandum of understanding on 20 February. It underscores and reinforces the cooperation between the European Union and the OPCW since 2003. I wish to seize this opportunity to express my appreciation to the European Union for its continued and long-standing commitment to supporting the activities of the OPCW.
35. On 29 February, the Secretariat provided its usual detailed briefing to States Parties on the Syrian chemical weapons file. Through the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT), the Secretariat has continued its efforts to clarify the shortcomings noted in the Syrian Arab Republic's initial declaration. After two and half years of delay, the rounds of consultations between the DAT and the Syrian National Authority resumed in November 2023, when the Syrian Arab Republic accepted all DAT members to deploy to its territory to conduct the twenty-fifth round of consultations. In January 2024, the DAT once again deployed to Damascus to conduct the twenty-sixth round of consultations. During these two rounds of consultations the DAT conducted meetings with experts from the Syrian National Authority, revisited the status of all outstanding issues, and interviewed several persons who were involved in the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
36. As a result of the work of the DAT, the Syrian Arab Republic submitted two additional amendments to its initial declaration and information that was sufficient to resolve three of the 20 outstanding issues. This means that at the moment there are 17 outstanding issues. Further details and outcomes of the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth rounds of consultations were provided during the Secretariat's briefing to the States Parties on 29 February 2024, as well as in my report on the work of the DAT on the same date (EC-105/HP/DG.1). The Secretariat will continue to implement its mandate aimed at verifying the full implementation by the Syrian Arab Republic of all declaration obligations under the Convention, decisions by the OPCW policy-making organs, and United Nations Security Council resolutions, and will continue to engage with the Syrian National Authority on this matter.
37. Pursuant to paragraph 11 of Council decision EC-83/DEC.5 adopted on 11 November 2016, the Secretariat conducted the tenth round of inspections at the Barzah and Jamrayah facilities of the Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) in December 2023. The Secretariat is in the process of planning the next rounds of SSRC inspections in 2024. On this matter, the Secretariat is following up on several issues arising from previous inspections of the SSRC. These include the unexpected presence of a dual-use scheduled chemical in a sample collected during the third round of SSRC Barzah inspections in November 2018, the notified plan for the construction of the waste incineration unit, which at the moment is on hold, and the presence of a large quantity of a dual-use chemical, also at Barzah.
38. The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria (FFM) continues its work on allegations that have been assessed as credible. Last December, the Secretariat issued its annual summary update on the activities conducted by the FFM (S/2232/2023, dated 21 December 2023). On 26 February, the FFM released a report on an alleged incident in Al-Yarmouk, the Syrian Arab Republic, on 22 October 2017 (S/2254/2024, dated 22 February 2024). The FFM obtained information regarding the incident from the usual diverse sources, including chemical sample analysis, interviews with witnesses, photographs and video recordings gathered during the field visit to locations

relevant to the reported incident, and documents and correspondence exchanged with the Syrian Arab Republic. The information obtained and analysed as a whole was not sufficient to provide reasonable grounds for the FFM to determine that toxic chemicals had been used as a weapon in the reported incident.

39. Currently, the FFM is looking into allegations covering more than 15 incidents. Pursuant to the decision adopted by the Conference of the States Parties entitled “Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use” (C-SS-4/DEC.3, dated 27 June 2018), the FFM has continued to periodically hand material over to the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT). Furthermore, the FFM is participating in knowledge transfer and capacity-building activities within the Secretariat.
40. On 22 February 2024, the IIT issued its fourth report on its sixth incident investigated. The report concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that units of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) were the perpetrators of the chemical weapons attack on 1 September 2015 in Marea, the Syrian Arab Republic. The IIT was able to reconstruct the organisational structure and chain of command that led to the use of chemical weapons by the Islamic State, in Marea, on 1 September 2015. According to IIT conclusions, strategic military operations such as the attack carried out in Marea involving the large-scale deployment of chemical weapons would only have occurred pursuant to direct orders from ISIL’s Executive Branch, that is, the Delegated Committee, operating directly under ISIL’s so-called “Caliph”. In the course of its investigation, the IIT was able to link additional organisational structures and individuals to the use and deployment of chemical weapons by the Islamic State, including ISIL’s Diwan Al-Jund (Department of Soldierly) and the Committee for Military Development and Manufacturing, identifying a total of four named individuals as perpetrators. Two further ISIL members were identified as the primary drivers of ISIL’s chemical weapons programme. On this basis, the IIT concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that on 1 September 2015, between 09:00 and 12:00 (UTC+3), during sustained attacks aimed at capturing the town of Marea, units of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant deployed sulfur mustard. The chemical agent was delivered using one or more artillery guns.
41. In closing on the Syrian file, I recall the decision on “Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use and the Threat of Future Use” adopted by the Conference at its last session (C-28/DEC.12, dated 30 November 2023). This decision makes new requests of all States Parties and gives the Secretariat new mandates, including on the Syrian chemical weapons file. The Secretariat is assessing the impact of this decision on its work, including the reporting requirements arising from it, and will report to the Council in due course. Paragraph 9 of the decision states that, considering the particular gravity of the situation and pursuant to paragraph 4 of Article XII of the Convention, the Director-General shall provide a copy of the decision to the United Nations Secretary-General in order to bring to the attention of the United Nations Security Council and United Nations General Assembly the following:
 - (a) the continuing threat related to the Syrian Arab Republic’s possession and use of chemical weapons;
 - (b) its failure to submit an accurate and complete declaration; and
 - (c) its failure to destroy its undeclared chemical weapons and production facilities, in compliance with its obligations under the Convention and United Nations Security Council resolution 2118 (2013).

42. The Conference also urged the General Assembly and Security Council to take appropriate actions to address the situation and advance accountability, while the Conference remains seized of the matter. I would recall that under Article VII of the Convention, it is the responsibility of each State Party to ensure that the Convention is implemented on their territory and that the OPCW policy-making organs are empowered to take action, as necessary.
43. On Ukraine, the Secretariat has continued to deliver support to that State Party, upon its request, in the field of assistance and protection. Of the EUR 2.91 million received from States Parties for assistance to Ukraine, to date EUR 1.62 million has already been committed. These contributions have allowed the Secretariat to assist Ukrainian first responders by:
 - (a) launching different courses on emergency response;
 - (b) acquiring a significant amount of protective, detection, and identification equipment; and
 - (c) preparing specialist training.
44. In the meantime, we continue to monitor the situation. I recall that, to take action regarding any incident the Secretariat needs to be formally seized. So far, no formal request of investigation or technical assistance visit has been made neither by Ukraine nor by the Russian Federation. Our experts have analysed all documents received in the past two years related to reported use of chemical weapons by Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The conclusion is that the elements presented so far do not meet the necessary threshold to qualify as reliable evidence to activate any mechanism. I wish to underline that the Secretariat is the expert body that has been mandated to evaluate evidence before activating mechanisms. I can assure you that we will continue to exert this responsibility and vigilance in full independence and expertise, in line with our mandates. In this regard, I have requested my teams to further increase their level of preparedness and coordination to respond to any valid request made by any State Party.
45. With regard to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, the Secretariat continues to monitor the situation and any allegations of use of chemical weapons that could arise. We are in contact with both sides, as evidenced by the documents shared with all States Parties.
46. These conflicts, and the potential risks they pose in terms of use or threat of use of chemical weapons, also remind us of the unfinished task of universality. The fact that a few States have not yet joined the Convention should be of concern to us all. I urge all States Parties to renew your own bilateral efforts with the four States not Party to encourage them to accede to or ratify the Convention.
47. The Secretariat is continuously reviewing its organisational structures, and job profiles, to ensure its continued readiness to deliver and respond. A case in point has been the adaptations made in the Inspectorate Division following the completion of the destruction of declared chemical weapon stockpiles. These adaptations are necessary in view of an unstable security environment and the developments in science and technology. As of January 2024, the Inspectorate Division has a new organisational structure which was approved by the Conference at its last session and is reflected in the current biennium Programme and Budget.

48. These changes will ensure that the Secretariat remains fit to conduct any type of mission, while developing further its capabilities, to respond to allegations of the use of toxic chemicals as weapons, upon request. The new structure will also facilitate the rotation of inspectors into a broader range of activities. This way, we will ensure our inspectors' readiness to be deployed to all types of missions, as well as other tasks such as supporting international cooperation activities. To this end, we have initiated a programme that will enhance their skills and knowledge, drawing upon synergies with the ChemTech Centre. To do so, we have used the flexibility of re-hiring inspectors to reinforce the retention of institutional knowledge.
49. I recall that the current decision on the re-hiring of inspectors will expire by the end of this year. It will be necessary to renew it and to expand it beyond the Inspectorate, as we have already demonstrated that we will need it, in line with the decision adopted by the Conference at its last session on limited exceptions to the OPCW tenure policy. This Organisation needs to remain the global repository of knowledge and expertise and to retain, as much as possible, specialised capacity. On this point, I encourage States Parties to continue the discussions on governance issues within the policy-making organs.
50. In regard to the Organisation's financial resources, in 2023 there was a collection rate for assessed contributions that exceeded 96% for the first time since 2018. It is vital that assessed contributions be paid in full, and on time, for the Secretariat to deliver effectively and efficiently.
51. Recruiting staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible is essential. I am pleased to submit to the Council a Note by the Secretariat on the "Implementation of the Action Plan on Geographical Representation" (EC-105/S/6, dated 26 February 2024). The Note presents a comprehensive and ambitious approach to this issue, comprising:
 - (a) a strategic framework;
 - (b) an implementation programme; and
 - (c) a monitoring and reporting mechanism.
52. The Secretariat has continued preparatory work for possible membership of the OPCW in the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund (UNJSPF). This includes arrangements that will be necessary to ensure a smooth transition to the UNJSPF, mindful of ensuring the best outcome for the Organisation and its staff.
53. The Organisation's physical security has become a priority. Many of you will recall the violent storming of the building that took place during the same week as the Twenty-Sixth Session of the Conference of the States Parties. This incident was reported by the Secretariat in its Note on 6 December 2021. Back then, 44 individuals were arrested after they had breached the perimeter of the OPCW Headquarters, in a coordinated and prepared manner. They violently forced open the doors at the main entrance, damaged property, attacked a security guard, and scared and endangered the freedom and security of the delegates and staff members present. The Secretariat actively worked on this matter with the relevant authorities of the Host Country, the Netherlands. On 16 February 2024, the District Court of The Hague convicted 14 suspects for their participation in breaking into the Headquarters of the OPCW, as mentioned above. The Secretariat reported on this judgement through a Note published last week (S/2260/2024, dated 1 March 2024).

54. Since the incident in December 2021, the Secretariat has spent more than two years working with States Parties to reinforce the security of the building. We have also worked with the Host Country, the Netherlands, to ensure that it reinforces its security outside of the building. As Director-General, I will continue to ensure that all measures are taken to respect the physical integrity of this institution, and the safety of the persons who come to the building, including high dignitaries who visit the Netherlands, Ambassadors, delegates, staff of the Secretariat, and others. We continue to ensure that all efforts are made to receive the financial and political support from the Host Country and from all of you.
55. I wish to seize this opportunity to thank you, Mr Chairperson, dear Ambassador Fătu of Romania, for your crucial contribution and your diplomatic skills in leading the work of this Council. This is the last regular session of the Council that you will chair, and it has been an honour and a privilege to work with you and to benefit from your experience, expertise, and friendship. This Council owes you a debt of gratitude for the efforts you have made, the interest you have demonstrated, and the expertise with which you have conducted the meetings, and in so doing facilitating the debate and the adoption of decisions, in a respectful and productive way. Thank you most sincerely.
56. The forums provided by the policy-making organs for the States Parties to discuss and adopt decisions are more important than ever in these current times. This Organisation has been a strong multilateral institution for almost 28 years, and it is your responsibility to ensure that it continues to deliver. You can rest assured of the Secretariat's commitment to assisting you in your tasks. We owe it to victims of use of chemical weapons around the world, to future generations, and to the international community. I wish you fruitful deliberations.

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