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INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

**STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS
AT THE EIGHTEENTH SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE STATES PARTIES**

On behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), I would first like to congratulate the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This is well-deserved recognition for its work over the past 15 years in bringing us closer to a world free of chemical weapons.

Ancient taboos against poisoning and modern-day rejection of chemical weapons are cemented in international law by the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Importantly, the universal acceptance of these rules is such that customary international humanitarian law prohibits the use of chemical weapons by any party to any armed conflict, anywhere in the world.

This makes it all the more shocking that on 21 August of this year the world witnessed the large-scale use of chemical weapons in rural Damascus; the worst of such attacks in 25 years.

The ICRC was appalled by this serious violation of international humanitarian law and remains very concerned about allegations of other instances of the use of chemical weapons during the armed conflict in Syria. All this has happened at a time when the suffering of civilians in Syria has reached unprecedented levels from the use of conventional weapons.

The ICRC welcomes Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and its commitment to systematically destroy, under international verification by the OPCW and the United Nations, all its chemical weapons and related facilities as required by the treaty.

The OPCW and the United Nations deserve the full respect and support of the international community for their efforts to reduce the risks of future use of chemical weapons. These efforts take the form of the ongoing implementation of plans for destruction of declared weapons and facilities – despite the formidable challenges posed by the ongoing armed conflict in Syria.

The recent reminder of the horrific effects of chemical weapons must give impetus and urgency to finishing the task of eliminating them completely, and to achieving universal adherence to the Convention. There can be no justification for any State to remain outside a treaty that aims “for the sake of all mankind, to exclude completely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons”. The ICRC urges the six States not yet Party to the Convention to ratify or accede without delay.



The events in Rural Damascus also highlight the difficulties involved in providing international assistance to the victims of a chemical weapons attack, difficulties that have been amplified in Syria owing to the breakdown of healthcare services and the lack of access for humanitarian organisations, including the ICRC, to the worst-affected conflict areas.

The OPCW is striving to boost its Member States' ability to protect their populations against chemical weapons, which is important in regions where capacity is lacking. Meanwhile, the ICRC and other humanitarian organisations are gradually developing their own capacity to continue their operations without jeopardising staff safety, and thus also be in a better position to help the victims.

While the ongoing disarmament efforts in Syria require substantial political attention, as well as human and financial resources, States must also remain focused on preventing the reacquisition of chemical weapons.

Addressing the risks posed by the use of toxic chemicals other than riot control agents as weapons in law enforcement is an area where preventive action is overdue. These so-called "incapacitating chemical agents" present serious danger to life and health. They risk undermining international law prohibiting chemical weapons and could constitute a step on to a 'slippery slope' that leads to the reintroduction of chemical weapons in armed conflict.

The ICRC's position, announced on 6 February 2013 following years of in-depth consultations with government and independent experts, is that riot control agents are the only toxic chemicals that should be used as weapons for law enforcement purposes. This is the overwhelming practice of all States and is consistent with the object and purpose of the treaty.

The ICRC was encouraged by the considerable attention paid to this issue at the Third Review Conference in April, including clarification of some national positions. The OPCW Director-General also confirmed, in his response (RC-3/DG.2) to the report of the Scientific Advisory Board, that the Technical Secretariat will develop its chemical analysis capabilities for the relevant toxic chemicals.

Again, the ICRC urges all States to take the policy and legislative action needed at the national level to ensure that the use of toxic chemicals as weapons for law enforcement purposes is limited to riot control agents only. We also urge the States Parties to begin a process of international clarification via the OPCW's policy-making organs, taking into account all applicable international law. This process must be driven by a sense of responsibility to uphold the object and purpose of the treaty.

In closing, the ICRC commends the continued efforts of States Parties and the OPCW to complete the elimination of chemical weapons, to prevent their reacquisition and, in the meantime, to build international capacity to provide assistance in the event of their use. We too will continue promoting these objectives.

Thank you.