



ICRC

**Twenty-Second Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, 27 November – 1 December 2017, The Hague, the Netherlands**

**Statement by the International Committee of the Red Cross**

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which has been a remarkable success. With only five States yet to join, the commitment to eliminating chemical weapons and preventing their use and re-emergence is now nearly universal.

As we move towards the Fourth Review Conference in 2018, and since there can be no justification for remaining outside the Convention, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) joins the calls for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Israel, Egypt, Palestine and South Sudan to ratify or accede to the Convention without delay.

Thanks to the dedicated work of possessor States, supported by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 95% of all declared chemical weapons stockpiles have been destroyed, bringing us closer to the Convention's promise of a world free of these horrific weapons. The ICRC congratulates the Russian Federation for having recently completed the destruction of its stockpiles.

This prohibition has, for the most part, been upheld. However, as all gathered here are acutely aware, this is the fifth consecutive year in which chemical weapons have been used, including sarin nerve agent, mustard gas, and chlorine.

The confirmed uses in Syria and in Iraq, and the use of a chemical warfare agent to poison an individual in Southeast Asia, are aberrations which must be condemned by all States in the strongest terms, as must any use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere.

In March this year, ICRC medical teams witnessed first-hand the aftermath of a chemical attack around Mosul, Iraq. They helped local medics decontaminate and treat 15 patients who were suffering from exposure to a blister agent and were admitted to Rozhawa Emergency Hospital in western Erbil.

The sarin attack in Khan Shaykhun, Syria, on 4 April 2017 was one of the deadliest chemical attacks of the Syrian conflict, as reported by the OPCW's Fact Finding Mission and by the OPCW–United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).

The ICRC strongly condemns the repeated and confirmed uses of chemical weapons. Again, it appeals to all parties to the armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, in the name of humanity, to uphold the prohibition of these barbaric weapons.

The way that the international community reacts to violations of the prohibition plays a critical part in upholding the norm and ensuring respect for the law. States Parties have a responsibility, individually and collectively, to do more to prevent the use of chemical weapons, and to hold those responsible to account, be they States, non-State armed groups or individuals. In this respect, the ICRC welcomes the recent decision by the OPCW Executive Council to address the threat posed by the use of chemical weapons by non-State armed groups.

It bears repeating that the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons is a rule of customary international humanitarian law that is legally binding on all parties to all armed conflicts.

Events of the past five years have also shone a stark light on the difficulties faced by those attempting to assist the victims of chemical weapons attacks. States Parties have both a responsibility to bolster their civilian response capacity and the right to request and receive assistance from other States Parties in the event chemical weapons are used or their use is threatened.

The ICRC, for its part, has deployed a limited response capacity to ensure the safety and security of its staff exposed to such risks, and to provide assistance to victims where circumstances allow. For example, following the incident in Mosul, ICRC teams provided medical teams at a number of hospitals around Mosul with additional training and equipment for decontaminating and treating patients exposed to chemical agents.

The ICRC is also concerned that misuse of chlorine as a chemical weapon could lead to additional humanitarian consequences by hampering its crucial, beneficial and peaceful use for drinking-water purification.

With the aim of upholding and further strengthening the norm against chemical weapons, the ICRC recalls its serious concerns about the development and use of highly toxic chemicals as weapons for law enforcement – so-called “incapacitating chemical agents” or “central nervous system-acting chemicals”. Poisoning is not a legitimate means of warfare, nor can it be a legitimate means of law enforcement.

The ICRC’s position is that the use of toxic chemicals as weapons for law enforcement purposes should be limited to riot control agents only. It continues to call on each State Party to join those that have already confirmed a national policy and legislation to this effect.

With that in mind, the ICRC welcomes the views of an expanding group of States – now numbering almost 40 – who have said that discussions are needed among States Parties to address the risks to life, and to the Convention, of the use of highly toxic chemicals as weapons for law enforcement, and to develop concrete recommendations that support the OPCW’s priority of preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

In closing, the ICRC appeals to all States Parties, now more than ever, to be resolute in their commitment to eliminating chemical weapons, stopping their current use, and preventing their broader re-emergence.