

Keynote Speech
From Proliferation to Prohibition:
Taking Stock at a Century of Chemical Weapons

A Century of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Enough!
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There are places and moments where history has been decided.

As we look back upon the use of weapons of mass destruction, Hiroshima is one such place. Nagasaki is another.

Ieper, I would posit, stands alongside these places in history.

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It was in Ieper where a dark period of warfare was recorded into history's books.

For on 22 April 1915, a four-mile trench filled with unwitting soldiers came under chemical attack of chlorine gas could not understand what they were choking from – or what many would soon die from.

Nearly 6,000 canisters filled with chlorine gas canisters were opened, and winds carried the poison gas towards the unsuspecting soldiers.

Within minutes, men were tearing at their faces and their throats, desperately gasping for breath.

First-hand reports depict a grisly scene of complete annihilation, with bodies of soldiers scattered everywhere.

One recollection states, “Even the animals had come out of their houses to die.”

Recognized from the outset as an inhumane weapon that killed indiscriminately, chemical weapons had been used extensively.

Throughout the twentieth century, several countries amassed enormous stockpiles of chemical weapons – and such weapons grew more lethal and terrifying over time.

Yet even amid the expansion of chemical arsenals, many were of the view that such weapons were cruel and should be banned.

A growing global consensus for the prohibition of chemical weapons culminated in 1997, when a treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, charted a verifiable course to the complete, global disarmament of chemical weapons.

Since 1997, when the OPCW was created to implement the Convention, the Organisation has made significant strides towards a future free of chemical weapons.

Not only does the Convention prohibit the production, possession and use of an entire class of weapons of mass destruction – but it does so in a non-discriminatory manner.

The Convention requires all countries possessing chemical weapons to declare and destroy their stockpiles. There are no provisions that allow some states to possess chemical weapons while others cannot

And all member countries must put into place national legislation to ensure that chemistry is used strictly for peaceful purposes within their jurisdictions.

To date, the OPCW has verified the destruction of 87% of all declared chemical weapons.

Let me elaborate a little.

Of our 190 Member States, eight have declared possession of chemical weapons.

Among these, three have completely destroyed their stockpiles, namely India, Albania and a State Party that requests not to be identified.

Iraq has finalized a destruction program for remnants of its chemical weapons, and Libya has eliminated its chemical weapons – with a relatively small amount of component chemicals remaining for destruction.

Amid an accelerated timeframe, 98% of Syria’s chemical weapons have been eliminated, including all of its stocks of sulfur mustard and main precursor chemicals.

Countries with the largest share of the world’s chemical weapons stockpile – Russia and the United States – have committed to ensuring complete destruction of their programs by 2020 and 2023, respectively.

The work to destroy chemical weapon stocks, particularly among the large possessor states, is incredibly labor and resource-intensive.

By early next decade, we expect to herald in a new era, as we will mark a disarmament achievement that will be without parallel in history.

But our work, and that of States Parties, does not end there and verifying the destruction of chemical weapons is not our sole activity

Our States Parties must open their industrial facilities to routine inspections by the OPCW – and submit declarations regarding the transfer of scheduled chemicals to assure secure trade in dual-use chemicals – chemicals that could be used to create weapons.

Our inspectors are working around the globe, inspecting such facilities to ensure that chemicals are produced exclusively for peaceful use.

Since 1997, we have carried out more than 2500 such inspections in more than 80 countries.

To ensure a world free of chemical weapons into the future, the OPCW must focus its efforts to stop the re-emergence of these brutal weapons.

We sustain networks of scientists and specialists to make sure we are at the vanguard of advances in science and technology – advances that could have important consequences for the verification and implementation of the Convention.

We assist our Member States to optimize their response in the unfortunate event of a chemical weapons attack – and further help them to prepare for any incidents involving the release of toxic chemicals.

We foster international cooperation on the peaceful applications of chemical science through training and assistance programs across the globe.

We are intensifying our outreach to industry, civil society, universities and schools to advocate for the peaceful use of chemical science.

And we do all this amidst an increasingly complex strategic environment, in which the rise of non-state actors, globalization of the chemical industry, and rapid advances in science, technology and communication will present new challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Amid the successes of the Convention, there remain some key challenges and threats to a chemically secure environment.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is among the most widely ratified treaties in history, however, six countries Myanmar, Israel, Angola, South Sudan, Egypt and North Korea have yet to join the CWC to affirm their commitment to the prohibition of these weapons.

As chemical weapons are not a strategic option for any country, we repeat our assertion that there is no justification for any country remaining outside the Convention.

Encouragingly, of these, Myanmar has now ratified the Convention and is likely to soon join as our 191st State Party.

We are ramping up efforts to make sure that Angola and South Sudan will follow suit.

Syria's joining the Convention in 2013 was a game-changing event with regards to the chemical weapons issue in the Middle East.

To this end, we continue to engage with Egypt and Israel, particularly in light of the positive impact on regional security that Syria's chemical demilitarization has had.

North Korea remains a concern, given its lack of engagement with the OPCW to date.

And we should not underestimate the threat posed by terrorists accessing chemical weapons.

One need only recall the use of sarin in a Tokyo subway two decades ago to remind us of these risks.

Though their use in large-scale conflict is likely a thing of the past, non-state actors represent an emerging and complex threat to a chemically secure future.

By now, we are well versed in the stated intentions of terrorist groups to attain – and employ – weapons of mass destruction.

The threat of chemical terrorism is a major concern for the OPCW.

Alarming, there have been new allegations that toxic chemicals are being used as a weapon in Syria.

We are collecting and reviewing information relating to these allegations and will decide on a course of action based on this analysis.

The Fact Finding Mission, established one year ago, has already substantiated earlier allegations and continues to work with the support of States Parties and United Nations Security Council resolution 2209 (2015).

The Syria mission has demonstrated many things.

But perhaps most relevant to Ieper, it demonstrated that the consensus against the use of toxic chemicals as weapons is by no means diminished over time.

The international community's revulsion against these weapons and our commitment to eradicate them is firm and undaunted.

Given that our mission is to ensure the prohibition against chemical weapons is implemented among our States Parties, we are working to strengthen national jurisdictions to better detect and prosecute criminal chemical activity.

We are building bridges with international organizations and frameworks to strengthen global capacity against chemical terrorism.

We are intensifying activities to monitor the production and trade of toxic chemicals

Ladies and gentlemen,

Chemical weapons have inflicted torment and suffering in many corners of the world over the last hundred years.

The lessons of Ieper are its enduring legacy.

For in the darkest moments of war, amid the most abhorrent uses of chemistry, the world got its first glimpse of the indiscriminate and forbidding use of chemical weapons, and their power to maim and kill.

Each day brings us one step closer to the reality of a world free of chemical weapons.

Yesterday, the OPCW and its States Parties honoured the memory of all victims of chemical warfare, and commemorated the centenary of the first large-scale use of chemical weapons here in Ieper.

During this commemorative event, our 190 States Parties issued the *Ieper Declaration*, a lasting testimony reaffirming their determination to completely exclude the use of chemical weapons – and underscoring their condemnation against any use of such weapons.

In this one- page text, 190 countries reiterated their commitments made to the Convention towards a future free of chemical weapons.

Though the scars on land and among nations have healed, the scars of chemical weapons are still fresh in the minds and bodies of many.

The *Ieper Declaration* is intended as a sincere tribute to their honour, and its display in this ancient town will be a reminder of our shared commitments for decades and centuries to come.

Thank you.