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AUSTRALIA

**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR DR BRETT MASON
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF AUSTRALIA TO THE OPCW
AT THE EIGHTY-THIRD SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Thank you Madam Chair,

Colleagues, the challenge before us is unique. Never before have we been confronted with the proven use of chemical weapons by a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

How we meet this challenge will define not only our commitment to the Convention, but whether the Convention and this Executive Council are in fact capable of effectively prohibiting chemical weapons.

The Joint Investigative Mechanism – the JIM – was established by the unanimous vote of the United Nations Security Council. And throughout its mandate, its practices and professionalism have never been called into question. Its conclusions are emphatic: There is sufficient information to conclude that Syrian Government forces used chemical weapons.

What is now in question is not the culpability of the Syrian Government for using chemical weapons - for that has been established.

What is now in question is not the findings of the JIM- for its impartiality and professionalism have been beyond reproach.

Rather, colleagues, the question now before us centres on our responsibility and our duty. It is us, colleagues. How we respond is the issue.

Our duty, the duty of members of the Executive Council, is spelt out in the Convention. Article VIII, paragraph 31 says: “The Executive Council shall promote the effective implementation of, and compliance with, this Convention”.

And let us recall, colleagues, what compliance with the Convention means. Again, from Article I, paragraph 1 of the Convention: Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstances to (a) develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons and (b) use chemical weapons.

What is at stake now is no less than the standing of the OPCW: our integrity, our reputation, our technical expertise and the credibility of our Organisation.



If we are not prepared to take decisive action against a State Party that is proven to have used chemical weapons, then, we might ask, what are we doing here?

How is it possible to create and oversee an organisation dedicated to the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons if we then refuse to prohibit them; if we will not promote and see through the effective implementation of, and compliance with, the Convention? How often does the Syrian Arab Republic have to use chemical weapons before this Executive Council will fulfil its responsibilities?

As the Director-General said in his opening statement this morning, there must be zero tolerance for the use of chemical weapons.

We have before us the United States of America's draft decision which presents the bare facts about the Syrian Government's actions, and proposes the minimum action that we - the Executive Council - could responsibly take.

Australia stands ready to support it, and we call on all other delegations to do the same. To do any less would be to abrogate our individual and collective responsibilities as members of this Executive Council.

Responsible states do not look the other way when nations breach the most fundamental norms of the international community.

Responsible states do not, by action or obstruction, weaken key international norms and imperil the credibility of major international agreements and treaties.

Responsible states do not cover for regimes that use prohibited weapons to kill their own people.

Failure to take decisive and collective action against the Syrian Arab Republic would make a mockery not only of this Executive Council and the OPCW - but it would make a mockery, most of all, of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

While the Syrian Arab Republic's violation of the Convention must take priority this session, we cannot lose sight of other challenges to a world free of chemical weapons.

Australia welcomes the start of discussions about the OPCW's future priorities. We look forward to contributing to the process, and we thank South Africa and Canada for chairing the working group.

For many governments, including Australia, a real threat to the future integrity of the Convention is the potential for highly toxic chemicals to be weaponised on the pretext of use in domestic law enforcement.

Together with Switzerland, Australia will continue to raise awareness about the serious dangers - of death or permanent injury - posed by the use of Central Nervous System-Acting Chemicals in law enforcement scenarios.

We will once again submit a joint paper to this year's Conference of the States Parties, calling for discussions on this subject. We urge all delegations to join this statement as co-signatories.

The recent appalling attacks carried out by ISIL – both in Iraq and in the Syrian Arab Republic – make clear the need for robust, immediate measures to prevent terrorist groups from using toxic chemicals to spread terror and inflict suffering on innocent civilians. This is a key priority.

We have before us, once again, the draft decision on addressing the threat of chemical weapon use by non-State actors. Australia strongly endorses the draft decision, and we urge all others to do the same.

I thank you.

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