



Statement by Australia
HE The Hon Brett Mason
Permanent Representative of Australia to the OPCW
87th Session of the Executive Council, 13-16 March 2018

Mr Chairman, 2018 is a year that gives rise to reflection.

We reflect that it is one hundred years since the end of the First World War, when modern science first met modern warfare and begat the first weapons of mass destruction. We reflect that today, a century later, chemical weapons are used still; hard lessons are yet to be learned.

We reflect on the global architecture for disarmament and non-proliferation, built up over decades, to prevent impunity for those who use Weapons of Mass Destruction.

And we are reflecting and reviewing the role of our Organisation – of this Council – leading international action to ensure accountability for the use, the recurring use, of chemical weapons.

And frankly, Mr Chairman, I reflect too on my country's own interests.

Like Australia, the majority of countries represented by my colleagues in this room are not major powers. We cannot rely on force to protect or project our national interests.

We rely on rules, on international rules. We rely on norms, on international norms. We rely on countries – from the least powerful to the most – abiding by these rules and by these norms.

We rely on institutions, rules-based institutions like the UN Security Council and the OPCW, to serve the peace and security interests of all countries, of all of us, not just the most powerful.

Mr Chairman, without these rules, without these institutions, without countries abiding by these norms, even great powers will likely suffer. But most certainly the rest of us will (suffer).

Mr Chairman

Australia joined the International Partnership against Impunity on the Use of Chemical Weapons to support the work of the OPCW. We joined to assist the international community to publicly attribute responsibility and ensure accountability for the use of chemical weapons.

The use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere at any time is illegal but, without accountability, our oft-vaunted refrain is simply empty rhetoric. Only with consequences can we give substance to our common pledge to prohibit chemical weapons.

Ladies and gentlemen, we know Syria has used chemical weapons on at least four occasions after acceding to the Convention. And we are witnesses to hundreds of other allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria.

Let me express once again Australia's full confidence in the ongoing investigative work in Syria by the (OPCW) Fact Finding Mission and Declaration Assessment Team, and the findings of the (OPCW-UN) Joint Investigative Mechanism.

The rules must apply to one and all, including those with powerful friends. We must not allow the purpose of our Convention to be compromised, nor the role of our Organisation – to prohibit chemical weapons – to be undermined.

We urge those of you who share our concerns to join the Partnership without delay. Only with greater shared commitment, can we prevent impunity. Otherwise, our good intentions, as we say in Australia, will simply be “whistling in the wind”.

Mr Chairman

Our organisation faces a world very different from five years ago. At the Fourth Review Conference we will look back at the lessons of the past five years as we look forward to better shaping our future.

A signal success has been the destruction of declared chemical stockpiles.

A signal failure is that chemical weapons are re-emerging.

Sarin, VX and other nerve agents, chlorine, sulphur mustard and fentanyl are reappearing as a threat to peace and security in our communities – whether they be in Eastern Ghouta, an international airport in Kuala Lumpur or a public park in Salisbury.

Mr Chairman, we are gravely concerned that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom confirmed a military-grade nerve agent of a type originally developed by Russia was used in an attempted assassination in the UK – the first use of a chemical weapon on European soil since the Second World War.

The Australian Government supports, in the strongest terms, Prime Minister May's statement in the UK Parliament including her government's commitment to ensure a full investigation and efforts to bring those responsible to justice.

We welcome the UK's notification of this incident to the OPCW and the UK's commitment to update the OPCW Technical Secretariat and Executive Council as more information becomes available.

Mr Chairman

With chemical weapons use re-emerging by both State and Non-State Actors, we should wait no longer to launch a policy discussion on Central Nervous System Acting Chemicals at the Fourth Review Conference.

The use of Central Nervous System Acting Chemicals, including fentanyl, in an aerosol form, for the purposes of law enforcement, directly undermines the spirit, object and purpose of our Convention.

Australia's and Switzerland's advocacy on behalf of 39 States Parties is very clear. It is based on the "exhaustive" advice of our Scientific Advisory Board that these chemicals cannot be used safely in a law enforcement context.

We call for the start of a discussion, an open discussion, amongst OPCW delegations without pre-empting its outcome.

We seek to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons. And we can only do that if we are prepared to have a discussion.

Mr Chairman

As the coolest man in the hottest chair at this Council meeting, can I thank you for your good humour and collegiate style through your tenure. We will miss your service.