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RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION
AT THE FIFTY-FOURTH MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Madame Chairperson,
Distinguished Colleagues,

We have reconvened in this room today to continue the discussion begun on 13 April concerning the urgent and extremely necessary steps required in connection with probably the most high-profile event to occur this year. First reports about it began to emerge a fortnight ago but, to date, no serious action has been taken to investigate it. We are not aware, at any rate, of any visit by representatives of the OPCW to the Khan Sheikun area. Further inaction may do very serious damage to the reputation of our Organisation, which, it is worth recalling, won the Nobel Peace Prize precisely for its contribution to the cause of chemical disarmament in the Syrian Arab Republic.

On the first day of this session, a number of delegations portrayed matters as though the guilt of the Syrian Arab Republic for using chemical weapons in the Khan Sheikun area had already been fully established. The United States not only “found” the Syrian government guilty but also inflicted punishment on it by means of a forceful military action, without waiting for the results of an investigation. A missile strike was carried out on a facility on the territory of a sovereign State, which constitutes a gross violation of the norms of international law, including the provisions of the United Nations Charter. There is every reason to call this an act of aggression. Such a description should not be perceived as demonstrating a wish to “stab” the United States delegation in a heated war of words. It is a dispassionate assessment, based on the definition of aggression adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly in 1974. This definition clearly specifies that one of the varieties of aggression is the bombing of one State’s territory by another State. This is precisely what happened recently in Syria.

We are bewildered that a number of the closest allies of the United States have rushed to express approval of this missile strike. Time and time again, they refer to its supposedly proportionate nature. Proportionate to what, may we ask? To the presence or absence of chemical weapons at the Shayrat airbase? In actual fact, a proportionate response to suspicions that chemical warfare agents might be present there would have been a request to the OPCW to conduct an inspection at the airbase. That would have made it possible very



swiftly, efficiently and strictly within a proper legal framework to establish the truth. Regrettably, the United States evidently does not believe in the effectiveness of the mechanisms of the Chemical Weapons Convention and prefers to act outside its legal scope by resorting to gross violations of international norms. It would appear that the aim of this unlawful action was a demonstration of force and intimidation, and not the elimination of chemical weapons, the existence of which in Syria no one has yet proven.

To justify its actions, Washington refers to its absolute confidence in Damascus's guilt. This is what our American colleagues themselves call a "bad case of déjà vu". We heard the very same things from our American colleagues 14 years ago, just prior to the invasion of Iraq. In our bilateral contacts back then, our American partners - exactly as they are doing now - alluded to purportedly reliable data from their intelligence services. As everyone well remembers, that whole saga ended in shame. Our American and British partners are yet to rid themselves of the stain. They ought to have learnt their lesson. But no: in this situation, too, they continue to act in the same way, not even bothering to make their position more convincing or plausible.

Particularly noteworthy in this context was the recent interview given by the British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, to the Telegraph newspaper, in which he called the use of chemical weapons by government airforce highly likely. In other words, the head of Britain's diplomacy does not have complete confidence about this. So, why then do our British colleagues take it upon themselves to make such utterly brazen assertions in the international arena? And have they no shame in supporting a missile strike when the motive for it is mere supposition?

Appeals are repeatedly being made to Russia to "put itself on the right side of history". We heard all this as well 14 years ago. The course of events went on to demonstrate that we had not needed to put ourselves anywhere, since we already were on the right side of history. France and Germany stood with us then in insistently seeking to ensure compliance with the norms of international law and with the provisions of the United Nations Charter. It is regrettable to see these two countries now taking the completely opposite position. It would seem that in their case, the lessons of history – on the right side of which they stood in 2003 – have been forgotten.

I would like to recall that there is as yet no clarity regarding the events in Khan Sheikhun. All the accusations levelled at Damascus ring hollow and are based on dubious materials on the social networks provided by a long-since discredited non-governmental organization, the "White Helmets", which has close ties with the terrorists of Jabhat al-Nusra and Al-Qaida. We recommend that you all become acquainted with the materials produced by the experts of the organization, "Swedish Doctors for Human Rights", who concluded that the children in the "White Helmets" videos had been rendered unconscious by the administering of psychotropic substances.

The Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations recently displayed heart-rending photographs in the United Nations Security Council, showing Syrian children purportedly suffering from the use of chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhun. Incidentally, she failed even to mention the Iraqi children who were suffering from chemical weapons use in Mosul at almost the same time. That matter leaves our Western colleagues completely unmoved. The same goes for the humanitarian catastrophe in Mosul, upon which - guided as ever by double standards - they observe a studious silence.

In any event, following the example of our American colleagues, we were planning to show you some visual aids. Unfortunately, when he found out about our intentions, the United States Permanent Representative to the OPCW – as you have all just witnessed, colleagues – succumbed, literally, to a fit of panic and hysteria. As a consequence, we have not managed to have the photographs displayed on the large screen. In the absence of technical back-up, we are forced to show you them at a distance. In these photographs, we see the children have highly dilated pupils, filling almost the entire iris, whereas the primary symptom of exposure to sarin is a contraction of the pupil. This confirms the findings of the Swedish doctors that the children in Khan Sheikhun had been subjected to poisoning with narcotic or psychotropic drugs.

In the next photographs, one cannot observe any of the symptoms that are characteristic of mild or severe exposure, such as copious salivation, lacrimation or discharge of sanies from the nose. It is obvious that whoever staged this footage has a weak grasp of the consequences of chemical weapons use.

The munitions type that features in the footage from the Khan Sheikhun area is not an aerial weapon – it has no tail unit or markings. It is most likely a home-made mine or some kind of metal item that is not at all related to fully-fledged aerial munitions. Just one of these frames should suffice for the version, according to which chemically-equipped bombs were dropped by government planes, to unravel. Many authoritative experts are convinced that it was not aerial bombs that were used but rather home-made chemical munitions that were blown up in situ with explosives.

Far be it for us to think we can try to win over our opponents. Our sole purpose in showing you this footage is to demonstrate that everything is not as simple as they would have us believe. All the questions can only be answered by immediately conducting a professional, top-quality investigation. We cannot be satisfied by the manner of the investigative actions of the OPCW's Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) with which it usually operates – in other words, working remotely and without visiting the site of the alleged incident, studying materials gathered from the Internet, and interviewing witnesses on the territory of Syria's neighbours.

In order to be truly effective and trustworthy, the investigation must meet at least three conditions.

Firstly, the investigative work must be carried out directly in situ, i.e. in Khan Sheikhun and at the Shayrat airbase, where it is claimed sarin used in Khan Sheikhun was stored.

Secondly, the composition of the investigators must be geographically balanced, as explicitly stipulated in the Convention and in the mandate of the FFM. This is something that must be addressed because, according to our information, the principle of broad and balanced geographical representation is not being complied with in the FFM. If this is not so, the Technical Secretariat can correct us and disclose the list of countries whose representatives are members of the Mission segment dealing with the investigation of alleged cases of chemical weapons use by government forces. We understand that it is not desirable, on security grounds, to reveal names but there cannot be any secrecy surrounding the countries from which the experts are selected and how many of them there are per country. It is clear that the representatives of those countries that are most hostile to Damascus must not predominate in the FFM membership. There is scarcely a need to prove that there are top-notch professionals not only in North America and Western Europe but also in Asia,

Africa and Latin America. When some of our Western colleagues sharply criticise Russia for raising the issue of equitable geographical representation, it is not the FFM's reputation that exercises them but rather their monopoly within it.

Thirdly, in the course of the investigation, one cannot content oneself with materials mostly garnered from the Internet and interviews with members of the opposition. The whole available gamut of investigative actions must be used as provided for by the Convention and the FFM mandate as well as the recommendations of the Joint Investigative Mechanism. Special attention should be paid to the collection of material evidence and samples directly at the site of the alleged incident.

If these three conditions - which are not, as some of our opponents are trying to claim, at all contrived or excessive - are met, we can count on there being a swift, high-quality investigation. And that is precisely the purpose of the draft decision before the Executive Council proposed by Russia and Iran. We count on support for it from all countries who are interested in establishing the truth. We are ready attentively and constructively to consider possible additions and amendments to the text. The vote on this document will show whether every single member of the Council is truly as keen as it says it is to have a vigorous and effective investigation or whether this is, for some of them, nothing more than a slogan, behind which lurks either indifference or a wish to conceal the truth.

However, before putting the draft to a vote, all the possibilities for reaching a consensus must be exhausted. We are ready for immediate and intensive consultations, including with the United States delegation, to this end. If our American partners are genuinely interested in establishing the truth through the conduct of a serious and immediate investigation, then we have a chance of reaching an agreement. If they are not, then there remains virtually no room for seeking mutually acceptable decisions.

I request this statement be circulated as an official document of the Fifty-Fourth Meeting of the Executive Council.

Thank you for your attention.

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