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**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR A.V. SHULGIN
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE OPCW
AT THE FIFTY-FIFTH MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
REGARDING THE REPORT ON THE INVESTIGATION OF THE INCIDENT
IN KHAN SHAYKHUN**

Mr Chairperson,

I would first like to apologise, as I will have to deviate a bit from my previously prepared statement. I must respond to the serious accusations made against the Russian Federation voiced during the statement by Mr Ward, the Honourable Permanent Representative of the United States of America.

We very much regret that our American partners have sunk to such a low level that the only possible next step would be insults and mudslinging. We do not, however, have any intention of engaging in any of this bickering. We will leave them with the things they are trying to pin on us to weigh on their own consciences. But for the sake of fairness: if anyone within the OPCW or outside of it is telling tales about the events in Khan Shaykhun, then it is most certainly our American partners.

With regard to the issue as to who crossed the line and whose actions were truly brazen, we have absolutely no doubt that those on the American team were the ones to take things too far, as were the so-called “White Helmets” and oppositionists of every stripe and colour, including those in control in Khan Shaykhun—the most hard-core of them all.

I believe that in light of today’s briefing, few here will be left with any doubt as to that matter. With all of the words of praise from the leaders of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) investigating the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic regarding cooperation with an NGO—at least what is provided in the report—these people were active participants in covering up critical physical evidence: fragments of munitions found in the impact crater. And what about their American curators? Have they been reprimanded? By all accounts they have not, since just a few days later they filled up that crater with cement.

The explanations that we heard at the briefing (the alleged urgent need for road repairs) are laughable. It really is inconceivable that these grey-haired, wizened men enriched by their years of life experience—all praised here as leading professionals—could accept this kind of twisted logic as the truth or even pretend that they believe it to be true. And the cockiest of them all are the oppositionists and the NGOs affiliated with them—shamelessly destroying



critical material physical evidence, all the while knowing that the American “curators” would cover their backs. It’s basically what we are observing here right now.

We would note that our American colleagues arguably have no equal when it comes to covering up the truth in modern history. In his statement, Esteemed Permanent Representative Ward once again presented the strike against the al-Shayrat airbase as intrinsically tied to the incident in Khan Shaykhun. As we are all aware, the FFM’s mandate obliges it to visit all sites related to the investigations of incidents involving chemical weapons. Since the Americans once again today publically confirmed this connection, logically that visit would have been made long ago. Moreover, the Syrians gave all necessary security-related guarantees. However, we would like to strongly emphasise that the Americans, after some deliberation, have categorically refused to even entertain the idea of such a visit. No matter how creatively one may try interpret the FFM mandate, the fact is that it was the United States that did all it could to prevent sending OPCW experts to the airbase.

And once again, Honourable Permanent Representative Ward sounds the alarm, referring to some kind of preparations for a new chemical attack at the very same al-Shayrat airbase. And the Americans cannot simply rest on their laurels. I speak to all of the delegations in this room today, and to the management of the Technical Secretariat: let us once and for all send OPCW experts to the airbase and we will find the answers to all of our questions. This is what we proposed at the Fifty-Fourth Meeting of the Executive Council, in a draft decision submitted on the matter jointly with the Iranian delegation.

Let the delegations think for themselves and decide who is really “sweeping things under the rug”: the Russian Federation, which has been calling for a thorough inspection of the al-Shayrat airbase, or the Americans, who are doing everything they can to prevent that from happening?

The Russian Federation has noted the report of the FFM on the results of its investigation into the chemical incident in Idlib on 4 April this year, according to which it was established that sarin or a sarin-like substance was used.

What immediately caught our eye was that the report addresses much of what the FFM was not able to do during this investigation. The inspectors were not able to ensure compliance with the chain of custody when collecting evidence from sources. And this gives rise to justified doubts. The many different samples that ended up at the disposal of the FFM, the witnesses that were made available for interviews, the photographic, video, and other material—essentially, none of these constitute primary evidence. All of it is merely circumstantial evidence from the incident, originating primarily from representatives of opposition forces and NGOs with an anti-Syrian slant. Without having visited the site of the incident, experts were not able to assess the topography of the site, independently collect samples, interview witnesses in the area who provided first aid to casualties, or establish “the toxic agent delivery mechanism” (in other words, the FFM does not know what kind of munition was used).

In the document, it is openly admitted that no thorough verification of the accuracy of the data provided on electronic media storage devices was conducted. In other words, none of the abundant information provided to the FFM by the opposition and NGOs was subjected to strict verification of its connection to any location, the site or time of a recording, or even its

authenticity. With these ingredients in the mix, there is no way to rule out any foul play when it comes to the nature of the video materials.

The FFM was also unable to visit the medical facilities to which casualties were initially sent in order to learn about their complete medical histories.

Unfortunately, it must be said that stylistically, the report was one-sided. In reviewing it, the uninformed reader will inevitably be left with the impression that the perpetrator of the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun is Damascus. Yet the only connections are merely detailed descriptions of the events that took place on 4 April this year in Khan Shaykhun in the words of a number of witnesses and casualties—the “howl” of Syrian aircraft against the backdrop of air-raided sirens, the “claps” and explosions of air-delivered munitions, and the efforts taken to save the casualties, including at medical facilities in a “neighbouring country”.

The untenable practice of conducting remote investigations “in a country neighbouring Syria” was continued and is what essentially made it possible for the FFM experts to respond so quickly to the tragedy in Khan Shaykhun by attending autopsies of the victims and hold interviews with casualties allegedly from the site.

After reviewing the FFM report on the incident in Khan Shaykhun, only one thing is clear: either sarin or a sarin-like substance was in fact used there. This is confirmed by, among other things, analyses of samples collected from the site of the chemical incident by Syrian authorities. However, key questions remain: by whom, under what circumstances, and by what means was this toxic agent used?

It is very important to us that we get to the bottom of this and establish the truth about what in fact took place in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April this year and who is behind this crime, in order to prevent this from happening again in the future. Here in Europe, the threat of terrorism hangs heavy in the air. The threat of chemical terrorism is becoming more of a reality. The overall ability of this Organisation and the global community as a whole to keep this plague of the twenty-first century at bay depends on whether we are able to complete the investigation on Khan Shaykhun and identify the true perpetrators of this tragedy. We all know just how horrific the face of chemical terrorism can be from the Tokyo subway tragedy—where, incidentally, sarin was used. And that is why it is critically important to focus on establishing the truth, instead of dodging inconvenient questions and taking the easy way out by finding a scapegoat for someone else’s sins.

In order to help others understand the position of the Russian Federation, we request that our position paper on this matter be distributed now, that it be published as an official OPCW document, and that it be published on the Organisation’s external and internal websites. I would kindly ask the delegations to please review it.

Thank you, Mr Chairperson.

We request that this statement be circulated as an official document of the Fifty-Fifth Meeting of the Executive Council.