



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Royal Military Academy of Belgium

Address by the Director-General of the OPCW, Amb. Ahmet Üzümcü

Brussels, Belgium

REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Acting Commander of the Royal Military Academy and Rector, Colonel Rudy Vlasselaer,
Excellencies,
Officers and Officer cadets,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

With its long and illustrious history, I am honoured by this opportunity to address you here at the Royal Military Academy. Over the 184 years that the RMA has been in existence, this establishment has produced the best and the brightest of Belgium's military leadership – from Gérard Leman and Jean-Baptiste Piron to the current Chief of Defence, General Marc Comperol.

It is also particularly auspicious to be speaking to you in a year when we remember the end of the Great War, one of the truly cataclysmic events of the last century.

It was young cadet officers like you that were at the fortifications of Liège and the trenches of Yser during that conflict. You have chosen a tough but noble vocation dedicated to service to your country. Regardless of the trials you face or the hardships you endure, you will stand as exemplars of duty, honour, and integrity.

As you survey the world in front of you, though, it will be marked by one certainty: change. Over the course of your careers, technology will advance relentlessly. Innovations in communication, materials, and computing will bring transformations in military affairs that were a dream to the soldiers of the First World War and inconceivable even a few years ago. Cyber defence, for example, will soon be just as important as physical defence, if it isn't so already.

While it is important, indispensable in fact, to remain focused on the future, the past should never be far from your minds.

Next month, we will commemorate the 103rd anniversary of the first large-scale use of chemical weapons, which occurred in the fields near Ieper. This moment signalled a terrible turning-point in what was already an inhumane war. By 11 November 1918, approximately 90,000 soldiers had suffered agonizing deaths from chemical agents such as chlorine gas, sulphur mustard, and numerous other weaponized chemicals. A million more were rendered sick, blind, or disfigured, and further millions were traumatised by the experience of fighting in a toxic environment.

Remnants of that war are still being retrieved from the battlefield. Belgium has led the way in the disposal of old chemical weapons. Each year, members of the Belgium Explosive Ordnance Removal and Destruction Service (DOVO) recover around 250 metric tonnes of unexploded shells from former battle sites, of which 5 to 10 percent are chemical-filled. These are destroyed at a single location in Poelkapelle, in accordance with the requirements of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

It is important to note that your government recently set up a Static Detonation Chamber at Poelkapelle. It was inaugurated in April last year to facilitate destruction operations in a safe, efficient, and environmentally responsible manner. As such, with the unwavering support of the Belgium government, at Poelkapelle in the coming weeks we will be conducting a training course on non-destructive evaluation methods and an additional one on old chemical weapons.

I had the privilege of visiting this centre during a trip to the area in November last year to commemorate the Battle of Passchendaele. I would like to express my appreciation to the Belgium government for hosting various training sessions and sharing its expertise with inspectors from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Ladies and gentlemen,

Chemical weapons are not just the problem of a hundred-year-old war but are very much a contemporary concern.

Even today, the legacy of Ieper is ever present. The use of poisonous gas during the First World War generated a strong disgust on all sides of the conflict for such a method of warfare. After the guns fell silent, the world sought to address chemical arms through international law. In response the international community came together and in 1925 it adopted the Geneva Protocol for the prohibition of chemical and biological warfare.

This was one of the first truly international arms control treaties of the Twentieth Century. It was only made possible by a shared abhorrence for chemical weapons that was born on the battlefield but cultivated afterwards by dedicated men and women into a binding legal commitment.

That commitment, however, was not comprehensive in scope. Use of ‘asphyxiating, poisonous, and other gases’ was prohibited under the Protocol, but other aspects such as production and stockpiling of chemical weapons were left unaddressed. Accordingly, the further development and refinement of warfare agents went on, leading to their persistent appearance in conflicts.

The international community continued to strive to achieve a more complete ban, and in 1993 it accomplished this with the adoption of the Chemical Weapons Convention. It finally entered into force in 1997 as a concrete, international legal instrument.

Today it is that convention which serves as the buttress to the international norm against chemical weapons. Support for the Convention is almost universal. To date, we can count 192 countries as States Parties, with only four – the DPRK, Egypt, Israel and South Sudan – that have yet to join.

The high level of support for the CWC is important. For actions to be meaningful and effective in our increasingly inter-dependent world, they need to be performed collectively. Multilateralism in the area of disarmament is heavily influenced by the principle of undiminished security for all. As long as one country is outside the Convention there is a proliferation risk. As long as one country is not fully constrained by the legal norm, there is danger of further chemical weapons use.

Universalisation of the CWC and fostering ongoing support for the norm are, therefore, primary objectives of the OPCW. Our security and stability are dependent upon the agreed rules and shared values being upheld by all.

As such, I am happy to inform you that South Sudan recently assured the OPCW that it is close to concluding the legislative process for joining the Convention. We look forward to welcoming them as our 193rd State Party.

Support for the Convention goes beyond a common revulsion towards toxic chemicals as weapons. It is adhered to because it works.

In 1993, what was opened for signature was a unique disarmament treaty. It not only banned the use of chemical weapons, but also outlawed their development, production, transfer, and retention under the most extensive verification regimes ever devised.

As a disarmament treaty, the States Parties are also required to destroy their chemical stockpiles through a demilitarisation process. Over the course of the past two decades, the States Parties have declared some 72,000 metric tonnes of chemical agents, and more than 96 percent of that has been eliminated under the watchful eye of the OPCW. We will finally reach 100 percent in 2023, when the United States completes destruction of its chemical stocks according to its planned timeline.

Upholding the norm means more than just getting rid of existing chemical arsenals. Monitoring industrial chemical production to ensure it is solely for peaceful purposes, as well as assisting the States Parties to benefit from the peaceful uses of chemistry are just as vital to our mission as our disarmament activities.

In fact, industrial inspections consume a considerable amount of the Secretariat's time and resources. Each year, hundreds of industrial inspections take place across the globe. Belgium

alone, with one of the most developed chemical sectors in Europe, has been subject to 71 inspection missions over the past twenty years.

Through international cooperation activities, States Parties from developing countries and emerging economies have been improving their capacity to implement the Convention and to benefit economically and technologically from the promotion of information and expertise.

These activities, while often outside the public eye and off the news headlines, have nonetheless been recognised for their contribution to global security.

In 2013, I had the immense privilege of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the Organisation for its extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons. The decision by the Nobel Committee, however, had a deeper significance beyond the OPCW's substantive achievements. It raised the importance of the norm against chemical weapons. Indeed, the Committee recognised at the time of announcing the award that, "the Convention and the work of the OPCW have defined the use of chemical weapons as a taboo under international law."

I would like to emphasise at this point that the norm the OPCW works to maintain is strong. But while the OPCW has made remarkable progress in facilitating the implementation of the CWC, this work has not been without its trials and obstacles. The Nobel Peace Prize came at a time when the Organisation was about to face its biggest challenge yet.

Our mission in Syria has been undeniably one of our biggest and most ambitious operations. And to this day, the persistent use of chemical weapons in that country continues to horrify the international community.

Our mission in Syria, which began at the end of 2013, has exemplified the OPCW's competence to fulfil its mandate even under the most trying and extraordinary pressures. Despite doubts about the OPCW's institutional capacity to undertake a mission of such magnitude and complexity, everyone involved exerted themselves far beyond expectations. It was about to coordinate and verify the destruction of a full chemical weapons programme amidst an active civil war.

But without dedicated partners, our work would have been nearly impossible. Some 30 States Parties and the European Union provided the necessary funds, material and technical support. At the same time, the United Nations supported us on logistical and security aspects of our operations.

The power of partnership was integral to enabling the Secretariat to oversee the removal, transport, and destruction of approximately 1300 metric tonnes of chemical warfare agent.

For example, in an unprecedented undertaking, 600 metric tonnes of Schedule 1 chemicals, the most toxic agents under the CWC, were loaded onto a Danish cargo vessel at Latakia, Syria. These were then shipped to Gioia Tauro in Italy, where they were transferred to a US vessel, the MV Cape Ray, which was equipped with a chemical neutralisation plant. The MV Cape Ray then moved to international waters to process the chemicals under continuous observation by

OPCW inspectors. Once this was completed the resulting effluent was moved to facilities in Finland and Germany for final destruction. Meanwhile the remainder of Syria's chemical weapons was destroyed at facilities in the United Kingdom, the United States, and in Syria itself.

Cooperation such as I have just described meant that the Secretariat accomplished its objectives not only within the twelve-month timeframe set by the OPCW Executive Council and the UN Security Council, but also in an environmentally safe manner.

While we had hoped that our work in Syria would end with the complete elimination of its government's declared stockpile, sadly it has not.

In early 2014, an increasing number of troubling and credible reports of toxic chemicals being used as weapons came to our attention. As stipulated under the Convention, a key function of the OPCW is to investigate alleged use of chemical weapons. Accordingly, a unique set of circumstances required a unique response, and in April 2014 I established a Fact-Finding Mission or the FFM based on my authority to determine the facts on the ground.

To date, the FFM, has been dispatched on 19 separate missions. Its work has been extensive and thorough, conducting 376 interviews of victims and witnesses, collecting 257 samples for analysis, and determining 13 likely or confirmed cases of chemical weapons use.

Our technical expertise has been crucial, since no one else can carry out this kind of investigation but us. As a result, the reports of the FFM were the basis of UN Security Council resolutions, as well as contributed to the work of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, better known as 'the JIM'.

However, it is not within the FFM's current mandate to attribute responsibility for proven chemical attacks. Still, it is our view that anyone who in any way engages in activities prohibited by the Convention should be held accountable for their actions. And let me be clear – under the CWC, any toxic chemical used for hostile purposes is unequivocally a chemical weapon.

Consequently, the OPCW placed high value on the work of the JIM, which was charged with identifying the perpetrators of the attacks in Syria. The Secretariat cooperated with the JIM, giving it full access to the information obtained or prepared by the FFM. The JIM presented its findings as reports that it submitted to the Security Council in 2016 and 2017. At present, the FFM is continuing its activities in Syria. In 2017, the FFM was able to conclude that sarin or a sarin-like substance had been employed in attacks on Khan Shaykun and Ltamenah in the spring of that year.

In a politically-charged environment, the value of the FFM to the international community is clear. It brings technical and impartial analysis of the available information and data, supplying clarity to one aspect of a complex, multidimensional conflict.

In addition to these activities, the OPCW continues to grapple with the questions concerning the Syrian Arab Republic's initial declaration that it submitted to the Secretariat in 2013 upon

accession to the CWC. In order to resolve the outstanding issues, I created a Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) which engages with the Syrian authorities, visit relevant sites on its territory, and to analyse samples taken during such visits.

In order to further deal with these unsettled matters, I also hosted high-level consultations in The Hague. Unfortunately, despite the submission of further documents, I had to inform the States Parties that the Secretariat still could not fully verify that Syria's declaration can be considered accurate and complete in accordance with the Convention. As such, our efforts to clarify the declaration are ongoing.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Even though the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic has absorbed a significant amount of the OPCW's attention, it has not been the only issue necessary for us to contend with.

On a fundamental level, the OPCW is in a process of institutional adaptation. With the conclusion of the US chemical demilitarisation programme over the next five years, the disarmament objective of the OPCW will essentially be fulfilled. When this occurs, it will be cause for great celebration. But does this mean that the doors to the OPCW will be locked and the staff will be told to go home?

Certainly not. Rather a shift is occurring within the Organisation whereby our focus will move to preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

Chemical stockpiles can be destroyed, production facilities can be dismantled or converted to peaceful purposes, but the knowledge and technical abilities to create chemical weapons cannot be unlearned or erased. Furthermore, access to this knowledge is not the monopoly of nation states.

Consequently, as the OPCW grapples with the coming transition and the corresponding challenges that it will pose, we must respond appropriately to make sure we are ready. In particular, two inter-related matters are of particular interest to the Organisation as it looks towards preventing re-emergence – chemical terrorism and the rapid advancement of science and technology.

Recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated that the threat of non-state actors employing toxic chemicals to carry out attacks is no longer a theoretical possibility, but an evident reality. But the risks have always been there. The 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo graphically highlighted the destructive potential of a determined group with access to the know-how and industrial materials. More recently, in Syria the FFM and JIM were able to confirm that the terrorist group ISIL used sulphur mustard in the town of Marea in 2015 and in Um-Housh in 2016. In Iraq, the Secretariat has also confirmed that ISIL employed the same chemical agent there, as well.

Against this backdrop, the OPCW can and must do more to prevent chemical terrorism.

Within the Organisation, there has been an Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism since 2001. It has served well as the main forum for the States Parties to exchange information and best-practices. The Open-Ended Working Group has recommended concrete measures that the Secretariat and the States Parties can take in response to the hostile use of toxic chemicals.

Adopting measures is one thing, but reacting effectively to an actual act of chemical terrorism is another. Depending on the extent, circumstances, and a country's level of preparedness, emergency services can be quickly overwhelmed. Under its commitment to facilitate assistance and protection against chemical weapons, in 2016 the OPCW decided to create a Rapid Response and Assistance Mission. The RRAM, as we call it, functions to lend support at short notice to a State Party, upon its request, to cope with an alleged chemical incident involving a non-state actor.

To provide effective emergency measures of assistance, the RRAM consists of a team of experts equipped with analytical equipment to detect and identify toxic chemicals, as well as the skills and training to secure an affected area and aid victims.

Ensuring the RRAM's readiness is critical to assuring the States Parties that the help will be there when called upon. Therefore, the Secretariat ran a field exercise in Romania last December to improve its capacity.

Coordinating and cooperating with other international organisations is also important. In January 2017, we held a table-top exercise within the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UNCTITF) to enhance inter-agency operability and communications.

In addition to keeping chemical weapons out of the hands of non-state actors, it is also incumbent upon the OPCW to stay abreast of the latest advances in science and technology. Our modern world is founded on science and its achievements – but I would like to note that the line between mass benefit and mass destruction is a fine one.

Despite the strong political nature of the OPCW and its disarmament and non-proliferation activities, as a technical organisation, its foundation is firmly built upon science in general and chemistry in particular. Just as it is essential to your studies here at the Academy to be up-to-date on technologies that will impact defence capabilities and readiness, the OPCW must remain in touch with the latest scientific developments and breakthroughs that may benefit or threaten the CWC.

To keep the OPCW and the CWC States Parties well informed, a Scientific Advisory Board was created by the Convention as a subsidiary body of the Organisation.

Comprising of twenty five eminent scientists selected from among the States Parties, the Advisory Board acts as a channel to the most recent scientific research available that may affect the implementation of the CWC. For instance, the latest report of the Advisory Board looked at topics as diverse as new chemical production techniques and nanostructured clays and oxides for the decontamination of chemical warfare agents. Advice such as this is aimed at strengthening

the Convention by alerting us to the unexpected dangers to its integrity, as well as flagging useful technologies and scientific techniques for its implementation.

The OPCW must not only be aware of what is happening at the forefront of science, but we must also be able to apply it to our activities. The OPCW Laboratory located just outside The Hague, plays an integral role in this regard. Equipped with advanced analytical instruments and staffed with a team of highly experienced chemists, the Laboratory is integral to our verification system and capacity building for our States Parties.

As such, a project has been launched to bolster and expand the OPCW Laboratory with additional capabilities benefiting from advances in science and technology. By doing so, our goal is to transform our existing lab into a ‘Centre for Chemistry and Technology’ to keep pace with current threats and in touch with future ones.

Improving our Laboratory also enhances the ability to lead our network of partner laboratories. Primary amongst these are the OPCW designated laboratories. I cannot understate their importance to the effective and reliable functioning of the verification regime. After passing rigorous proficiency testing, the designated labs are certified to analyse samples collected during the Organisation’s inspections. Their assistance with bio-medical samples from Syria was instrumental in investigating the use of sarin in that country.

Belgium’s Defence Laboratories Department in Vilvoorde is one of the prestigious few to be an OPCW designated laboratory. We greatly appreciate that DLD has signed the Technical Agreement with the Secretariat regarding the authentic environmental sample analysis and also assisted in off-site sample analysis.

In addition, the laboratory has participated in the first biomedical sample analysis exercise and has also contributed data towards OPCW’s chemical database (OCAD).

I am grateful for the commitment of the Belgium authorities to the issue of chemical analysis. The exchange of high-level expertise between the OPCW Laboratory and the designated labs is essential for the development of the Organization's capabilities along with those of the States Parties.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I mentioned in the beginning, the only certainty in this world is change – and change the OPCW must. In November this year, the States Parties will gather in The Hague for the five-year Review Conference to the CWC. This will be a moment to debate the status and operation of the Convention and the priorities of the OPCW. More importantly, though, it will be an opportunity to take hard decisions that will better prepare the Organisation for the shift to preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

These decisions shall demand strong political will in order to achieve the necessary agreements to maintain the Organisation’s relevance and viability. Even though a single State Party’s interests may be at odds with the collective needs, the critical imperative is to protect the norm

against chemical weapons. Debate, discussion, and engagement among the States Parties must engender the consensus needed to strengthen the Convention and set the OPCW's future course.

In a recent book about the how democracies die, the Harvard academics Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt pointed out that “[l]ike oxygen or clean water, a norm's importance is revealed by its absence.” I could not agree more.

Events in Syria have not undermined the norm against chemical weapons; rather they have underlined its continued significance. Still, I must emphasise that the norm needs to be further strengthened by holding to account those who violate it.

The States Parties of the CWC have helped build an Organisation that is endowed with the embedded institutional competence to adapt to the multiplicity of challenges it has encountered. Looking to the future, I am confident both the OPCW and the CWC will continue to make the world safer for all.

I thank you for your attention.
