



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS
21st International Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation Conference (CWD)

Keynote speech by the Director-General of the OPCW

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REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Minister of State for Defence Lord Howe,
Director of DSTL Gary Aitkenhead,
Assistant Secretary for Defence Guy Roberts,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to express my earnest appreciation to the UK Ministry of Defence and Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) for organising the 21st International Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation Conference. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address you all in what will be my last occasion here as the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

I have had the great honour over the years to be a regular attendee and speaker at this conference. I have enjoyed and profited from the discussions and debates among the participants. Your backgrounds stretch broadly across government, military, industry, academia, and development sectors. Your insights have educated and informed me.

I must thank the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland for its continual hosting of this event.

The United Kingdom has been a consistent champion of the OPCW and an active and vocal defender of the global norm against chemical weapons, which is underpinned by the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

There has recently been intense focus on the work of the OPCW due to the very high profile allegations of use of chemical weapons. Just when we thought that these heinous weapons had

finally been consigned to the dustbin of history, they have re-emerged as weapons of war and terror. Our undeniable progress in eliminating chemical weapons must not allow any lessening in the resolve to deal with on-going challenges and towards ensuring the effectiveness of Convention as a permanent barrier against chemical weapons.

It is indeed regrettable that the norm everyone in this room has strived to promote and uphold for so long is being frequently violated.

While we must focus all our attention and energies to remedy the situation created by the recent use of chemical weapons, it is important not to lose sight of the great strides that have been made by the international community to eradicate and prevent the re-emergence of this abhorrent method of warfare. On this path we have been advancing – quietly, steadily, and surely thus giving cause for hope and reasons for renewal of commitment.

Since I last addressed this conference, the OPCW has made great strides in chemical demilitarisation and significant steps in hampering the acquisition and use of toxic substances by non-state actors.

Just as importantly the Organisation has been honing its own capacity to assist States Parties to the CWC that are grappling with incidents of chemical terrorism.

Against this backdrop of challenges, achievements and initiatives, the OPCW will undertake its crucial five-yearly review process. The outcome of the Fourth Review Conference, which is scheduled for this November, will have lasting consequences as it will set the tone and structure of the OPCW's transition into the post-disarmament era of its work. Accordingly, the presentations and discussions that will take place during this conference shall help frame the critical issues to shape the Organisation for years to come.

In this context, my comments today will focus on where we currently find ourselves, what the OPCW has done to meet the challenges, and how it may move into the future.

Over the past twelve months the Organisation has passed significant way-markers on the road to ridding the world of existing chemical weapons stocks.

One of the most important among these milestones was the completion of the Russian Federation's chemical demilitarisation programme ahead of its extended deadline of 2020. On 27 September last year the National Authority of the Russian Federation announced the complete elimination of Russia's declared stockpile and held a ceremony at the Kizner Destruction Facility to mark this occasion, which was attended by the Deputy Director-General.

At the time of its entry into force the Russian Federation possessed the world's largest chemical arsenal – which constituted approximately 40,000 metric tonnes of the deadliest warfare agents known to humankind.

The verified destruction of its declared stockpile is therefore a significant milestone in the implementation of the Convention. Moreover, it is a triumph for international cooperation since

multiple States Parties – many represented here today – provided vital financial and technical support to the Russian demilitarisation programme over its lifespan.

Another milestone was also reached late last year. On 28 November, the remnants of the Schedule 2 chemical weapons in Libya had been destroyed at a chemical destruction facility, GEKA, in Munster, Germany. This signalled the end of Libya's chemical demilitarisation process, and subsequently the OPCW dispatched a team to Munster in the first week of December to verify destruction. A ceremony was held in early January this year at the GEKA facility to mark this landmark event which I attended. In this connection, I would like to extend my gratitude to the European Union and its member states for confirming their readiness to contribute to the decontamination of the former chemical storage site at Ruwagha.

Both of these successes can be attributed to a number of factors, but prominent among them is the power of partnership. When the Libyan government, for example, requested assistance, 12 States Parties provided the necessary in-kind and financial resources to implement the safe and secure removal and disposal of the chemical weapon remnants. As a result, the tanks of highly dangerous materials were transported out of its territory in just over seven months. Cooperation such as this is a hallmark of the Organisation and is intimately connected to its capacity to respond with agility to unforeseen circumstances.

In other areas related to chemical demilitarisation, in the United States, progress on destruction of its Schedule 1 chemical weapons remains at 90.6%. The unchanged situation is due to technical difficulties at the Pueblo Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant. The construction and systemisation at the Blue Grass Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant continues. Destruction is still on track for completion by 2023.

We continue to see the Chinese and Japanese governments make steady efforts towards destroying chemical weapons abandoned on Chinese territory in Haerbaling and other areas. In fact, in June last year I visited the People's Republic of China with a high-level delegation representing the Executive Council of the OPCW to better understand and to assess the status of these operations and the technical and administrative issues revolving around them. I am always heartened by the level of co-operation between China and Japan on this issue. And cannot help but be impressed at the complexity of the operation that is in place to destroy these weapons.

In Iraq, again I can provide welcome news. On 23 November last year, the Iraqi authorities notified the Secretariat that they had completed the encapsulation of the two chemical weapons bunkers at the Al Muthana site south west of Samarra. The Secretariat was able to verify the completion of the encapsulation process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We should be rightfully pleased with the ongoing developments that are leading gradually towards our ultimate goal of a world free of chemical weapons. Nevertheless, I cannot emphasise enough the real threat that the Convention now faces on account of the continuing use of chemical weapons.

In my statement at this Conference last year, I had mentioned the extremely difficult circumstances in which we undertake investigations into alleged uses of chemical weapons in Syria. This is due to the on-going civil war and the security conditions that make on-site activities highly risky and therefore not always possible. Yet, in the collection, analysis and reporting of evidence, we have never compromised on procedures and methods that are grounded in the Convention and in science and also otherwise conform to internationally accepted standards. I had stressed that we simply did not have the option of inaction simply because in an environment of political disagreement, questions have been raised about the value of such investigations. I had said that submitting to this political paralysis would amount to acceptance of impunity.

A year later, the situation has not changed. There have been further documented cases of use. When we met last year, the investigation by the OPCW FFM into the incident at Khan Shaykhun was underway. We all know that this indeed turned out to be a serious case of use of Sarin and a clear violation of the norms of the CWC.

Events in Douma and Salisbury are but two of the more publicly known recent incidents.

On 7 April this year, the OPCW reacted to credible reports of the use of toxic chemicals as weapons in Douma, a town in Eastern Ghouta.

A team of Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) experts was dispatched to Syria and eventually, after some delay due to factors beyond its control, was able to start collecting samples on 21 April. As at this time, the FFM had completed its initial deployment to Douma and the gathered samples are being examined by the OPCW designated laboratories. A report will be issued once the analysis of all available information and materials, including the sample analysis, have been completed.

The suspected attack on Douma demonstrates that the FFM is still an indispensable investigatory mechanism and a sad reminder that chemical weapons are still a feature of the Syrian conflict. Irrespective of its valuable role, the FFM is limited in what it can do. Under its current mandate, it can only assess the facts on the ground and determine whether or not chemical weapons had been employed in an incident. Attribution of responsibility is out of its scope.

Attribution, however, was part of the terms of reference for the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) which had indeed pointed out in several cases the parties responsible for chemical weapons attacks.

As important as the JIM's work was to ensuring that violators against the chemical norm were spotlighted, its mandate was regrettably not extended by the UN Security Council last year. This has left a gap in our ability to investigate violations of the CWC and to hold perpetrators accountable.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is comprehensive enough to allow the OPCW itself to be legally equipped with the possibility to go into attribution.

The Organisation has shown through its recent work, that once tasked and resourced to undertake challenging missions, it can indeed more than deliver.

At the same time, it is critical that the international community adopt a clear and firm stand against those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. This is the responsibility of the policy organs of international bodies. They are the guardians of the international regimes that have been built upon shared and hard earned norms such as the one against chemical weapons. If such fundamental norms are not protected, the credibility of the regimes will be called into question and norms will erode with unforeseen consequences. Once undermined, huge efforts would be required to restore such institutions.

This brings me to Salisbury. On 12 March the OPCW Executive Council was informed by the UK delegation that a chemical weapon had been used in an incident in Salisbury on 4 March. Subsequent to this, on 16 March the Permanent Representative of the UK invited the Secretariat under Article VIII of the CWC to send a team of experts to assist in the evaluation of suspected unscheduled chemicals.

The use of any toxic chemical to harm people is of serious concern to the OPCW. In response to the United Kingdom's request a technical assistance team was dispatched to Salisbury. Samples were taken by our experts from suspected contaminated sites and from the three main victims. I am pleased to learn all of them are now doing well. The samples collected under full chain of custody were brought back to the Netherlands for splitting at the OPCW Laboratory and analysis at four designated laboratories.

When the Secretariat concluded its work, our results confirmed the findings of the UK related to the identity of the toxic chemical used in Salisbury. In particular, the OPCW's report noted that the toxic chemical was of high purity. Given that the OPCW's assistance was independent of the UK's investigation, the British authorities are continuing their inquiries into what happened in Salisbury on 4 March. We are awaiting their conclusion with interest. Meanwhile, I have asked the Scientific Advisory Board of the OPCW to provide me with some recommendations in regard to possible actions to be taken by the Organisation on this matter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite these serious challenges to the CWC, it is imperative that the OPCW keeps an eye on other emerging threats as well. In recent years, a key, growing focus of the Organisation has been the very real risk of non-state actors acquiring and using toxic chemicals to kill and maim.

Slowly and steadily the OPCW has deepened its involvement in the issue of countering chemical terrorism. In this respect, the Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism and its Sub-Working Group have provided a valuable platform for the States Parties to debate and put forward within this sphere with the aim of producing concrete action.

There is a clear and continuing role for the OPCW in countering chemical terrorism.

Accordingly, the adoption in the Executive Council last October of the decision entitled “addressing the threat posed by the use of chemical weapons by non-states actors” was a landmark move towards setting out the parameters for action by the States Parties and the Secretariat.

Sustained efforts are required to maintain momentum on the decision. With this in mind, the OPCW has decided to convene a Conference on Countering Chemical Terrorism to be held on the 7th and 8th of June in The Hague. What will make this conference especially unique is that it will bring together chemical terrorism experts not only from government and international organisations, but also academia, industry, and civil society. Their deliberations will revolve around numerous topics, but ultimately we expect that they will add to our understanding of the current and future role of the OPCW in this area and raise awareness of the dangers associated with this threat.

No organisation, however, can be expected to tackle terrorism alone. Its reach casts a shadow across multiple areas involved in international peace security. The OPCW has already constructed an active partnership with the United Nations through its Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF). Enhancing coherence between the OPCW and the 38 UN entities engaged in the activities of Task Force is of mutual benefit, and as a result I recently decided to sign the ‘Counter Terrorism Coordination Compact’ which builds closer coordination with these entities.

While prevention is the most effective approach to keeping populations safe, maintaining a robust emergency response capability in case of a chemical incident is a prudent safeguard. The Rapid Response and Assistance Mission (RRAM), which was established over two years ago, acts as such a safeguard.

In an emergency situation involving the release of toxic chemicals, time is a critical factor. To ensure that the RRAM is ready to deploy at short notice to the territory of any State Party upon its request, the OPCW conducts training exercises to test its competency across a range of emergency response measures.

OPCW’s emergency response capacity is also augmented by our analytical abilities. Swiftly identifying whether an incident is an accident or intentional can be difficult, especially in the complex and confused situation of a mass-casualty event. The OPCW Laboratory, as our centre for chemical analysis, not only supports OPCW verification and investigation missions, but also supplies training to States Parties to bolster their analytical skills.

Strengthening the OPCW Laboratory science and technology capabilities in order to deal with the full spectrum of threats, as well as to boost its training programmes, has become a major priority. In response to this obvious need, the Organisation has launched a project to upgrade the laboratory into a Centre for Chemistry and Technology. The objectives of this project are to augment in-house analytical capabilities, enhance the investigatory function, and to expand the infrastructure to provide a better training experience to States Parties.

Prevention of chemical terrorism, however, remains largely up to each State Party to tackle under their own legal system and through the enforcement of their own rules and regulations. Full implementation at the domestic level of the provisions of the CWC is an effective obstacle to non-state actors gaining access to materials that could be used for hostile purposes. Yet, 70 States Parties have not enacted comprehensive national implementing legislation – either their legislation only covers some of the initial measures, or they have no legislation whatsoever.

International programmes offered by the OPCW such as the ‘Internship Programme for Legal Drafters and National Authority Representatives’ provides the technical legal support to States Parties to produce the appropriate legislation. Additional to this the OPCW has also organised a series of seminars called Regional Stakeholder Forums to help States Parties through the exchange of experiences and best practices.

Chemical terrorism is a problem that cannot be definitively solved. Diligent implementation of the legal obligations coupled with effective response measures offer the best protection in this regard. But our response to terrorism will not follow a neat timeline nor will success be easily quantifiable.

This is the reality of the OPCW’s overall shift towards preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons – it will involve different approaches to the traditional disarmament and demilitarisation activities that have been the mainstay of the Organisation’s mission for more than twenty years. Moreover, it will necessarily be the Organisation’s future, long-term goal.

These are the stakes at play as we move closer to the Review Conference. Making this transition requires a reconsideration of the structure, composition, and resources of the OPCW. This will be an exercise in deep and determined debate. On the other hand, adopting an outcome document that will facilitate the requirements of the transition will be an exercise in negotiation and compromise.

Thank you, I wish you all fruitful deliberations over the course of the conference. I want to conclude by expressing my gratitude to all of you who have worked hard over the years for our common goals. I wish you every success in your future endeavours.
