



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Opening address by the Director-General of the OPCW

Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü

Conference on Countering Chemical Terrorism

7 June 2018

The Hague, the Netherlands

REMARKS AS DELIVERED

Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me express at the outset my appreciation to all of you for taking part in the first OPCW Conference on Countering Chemical Terrorism. I would like to extend an especially warm welcome to our keynote speaker, Ms Catherine De Bolle, the Executive Director of Europol.

While she only took up her post in The Hague last month, she has had a long and successful career in the Belgium Federal Police. Her insights will help stimulate our thinking and initiate our discussions. As the OPCW's neighbour in The Hague, we look forward to forging closer ties with Europol in areas of mutual concern. Chief among these is the threat posed by terrorism.

I would also like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to the governments of New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States for their generous financial contributions to this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to see such a large and diverse group of experts and practitioners in the field of counter-terrorism from government, international organisations, industry, academia, and civil society here at the OPCW Headquarters. Your presence attests to the pressing nature of the threat we have gathered here to discuss: that of non-state actors acquiring and using chemical weapons.

Terrorism affects us all. From the local to the international level, the threat and the consequences of terrorist acts place a terrible burden on all of our societies. But its impact is hardest felt in the loss of innocent lives. In 2016, there were more than 11,000 terrorist attacks across the globe resulting in approximately 25,600 deaths and 33,800 injuries.

While the vast majority of these attacks used conventional weapons and methods, non-state actors have not only shown the desire to obtain or develop chemical arms, but also the ability to do so.

The sarin gas attack by the Aum Shinrikyo cult on the Tokyo subway system in 1995 was a wakeup call to the world. That one incident demonstrated the horrifying potential of chemical warfare agents as instruments of terror. The sophistication of the aforementioned attack has yet to be matched by any other non-state actor.

However, in recent years the use of chemical weapons in Iraq and Syria by the terrorist group ISIL has proven that toxic chemicals can offer a potent means of sowing terror. While ISIL's reach is increasingly weakening, deep concerns about chemical terrorism remain. As ISIL's fighters disperse, the prospect of them returning to their home countries with the know-how and motivation to employ chemical weapons against civilian targets is a concern that we cannot afford to take lightly.

Chemical terrorism may take many forms, varying from sophisticated efforts to create military-grade agents, to opportunistic attacks using common industrial chemicals. What they share is the intent to use the toxic properties of chemicals to kill and maim, and to inspire fear and terror.

The Chemical Weapons Convention was created to prevent such scenarios from unfolding. While the Convention was primarily designed to focus on the actions of States, at its core lies a promise that chemical weapons should be consigned to history. We must do everything in our power to deliver on that promise.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Through this conference, we wish to develop a deeper understanding of the threat of chemical terrorism, thereby exploring further practical measures to combat it. I therefore encourage you to share your insights and experiences, and contribute actively to the Conference's deliberations.

Equally, through your discussions here, I urge you to consider how a disarmament and non-proliferation regime like the Chemical Weapons Convention can effectively contribute to countering one of today's most pressing security challenges. In bringing together two communities of expertise – the CWC and counter-terrorism – we hope to stimulate new thinking, forge a deeper sense of common purpose, and chart concrete steps forward.

For its part, the OPCW has been working to grapple with the issue of non-state actors in a more comprehensive manner. The Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism, with its Sub-Working Group on Non-State Actors, has been the main platform for States Parties to discuss and exchange best practices in terms of preventive measures and chemical security.

As in this conference, the OPCW's terrorism working group has focused primarily on three core issues: prevention, response, and legal accountability. It has provided an important forum for CWC States Parties and invited experts to share their experiences and to propose new ways forward in countering chemical terrorism. Its work has taken on a new sense of urgency over the last several years, as chemical terrorism has evolved from a theoretical possibility to a dreadful reality.

Last October, the Executive Council further recognised this urgency by adopting a landmark decision aimed at addressing the threat posed by non-state actors using chemical weapons.

This decision recognised the fundamental risk posed by chemical terrorism to the Chemical Weapons Convention. Hence, it established parameters of action for States Parties and the OPCW, as we seek to augment our efforts in this area.

Critically, this decision underlined the fundamental importance of national implementation of the Convention as a contribution to countering terrorism. It recognised that implementing the CWC is not just about complying with the requirements of the verification regime, rather, it should be the foundation in each State Party of a national-level approach to all chemicals of security concern.

In supporting our States Parties, the OPCW will continue to emphasise this approach. Enhancing chemical security will remain fundamental to preventative strategies and will continue to be a prominent part of the OPCW's capacity-building programmes.

Ensuring that our States Parties can respond should the worst occur will also remain a central focus of our work.

The OPCW has sought to take advantage of its unique experience and expertise to assist our Member States in dealing with the hostile use of toxic chemicals by non-state actors. The establishment of the OPCW's own emergency-response capacity has been an essential step in this direction. The Rapid Response and Assistance Mission (RRAM) is a team of experts that gives support to emergency services and first responders by deploying to any State Party upon its request to do so.

In our last session tomorrow, we will concentrate on ensuring the legal accountability of non-state actors. Passing legislation that makes the provisions of the CWC binding on individuals and corporations, as well as enacting penal sanctions for violations, are obligations for States Parties under the Convention.

Nonetheless, as at this moment, 70 States Parties have either partial implementing legislation or no legislation whatsoever. The OPCW is working towards raising the number of States Parties with comprehensive implementing legislation through support activities aimed at legal drafters and National Authorities. We cannot allow non-state actors to evade responsibility through gaps in CWC implementation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon. A holistic approach is therefore necessary in countering it, including at the international level.

This is why we appreciate the leadership of the United Nations in deepening coordination among the UN entities and agencies that have a role in countering terrorism. Earlier this year, the OPCW was invited, along with other organisations, to sign the UN's 'Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact'. I was pleased to do so, and we look forward to even closer collaboration with the new UN Office for Counter-Terrorism.

Further, recognising the necessity of enhancing international readiness, the OPCW has taken a leading role in the efforts of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force to tackle the threat of chemical or biological terrorism. Fifteen international organisations are currently taking part in a joint OPCW-IAEA project on coordinated response.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The ever-increasing inter-connectedness of the world and the ubiquitous nature of many toxic chemicals that have dual-use nature, challenge our efforts to grapple with the threat of chemical terrorism.

The contribution of the CWC and the OPCW to countering that threat will necessarily be just one component of the response. But it is an important one – if unchecked, there is a potential for the threat of chemical terrorism to metastasise over time, weakening the norm against chemical weapons and placing our societies in greater peril. Our collective responsibility to act is clear.

Over the coming two days, you will have the opportunity to debate, to question, to learn, and to connect. I encourage you to seize that opportunity, and to make this conference as interactive as possible. We count on your expertise, your experience, your insights, and your active contributions, to address the important issue at hand.

Countering chemical terrorism is a formidable task, and one that is likely to shape the work of this Organisation for years to come. We do not expect to do this alone. All present attendees, and many others, will have a part to play. Such is the purpose of this conference. I hope it will bring new perspectives and open up new avenues for further cooperation and concerted action.

It gives me great pleasure to declare open the first OPCW Conference on Countering Chemical Terrorism.

Thank you.
