

Victim Remembrance Day Statement by Director-General OPCW
29 April 2014

His Excellency, Mr Hoshyar Zebari, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq,
Her Excellency, Ms Renee Jones,
Mayor Van Aartsen,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last week, we marked the 99th anniversary of the first large-scale use of chemical weapons at Ieper in Belgium during World War One.

From the battlefields of Flanders in 1915 to the suburbs of Damascus only last year, chemical weapons have a horrific legacy.

Weapons that have killed, suffocated or blinded hundreds of thousands of victims around the world.

Weapons that have brought agonising death and untold suffering – not only upon soldiers, but tragically, upon civilians as well.

Weapons that have all too often been used to terrorise peaceful populations.

For poisonous gas is not a bullet or a missile that kills and maims with accuracy. Rather it drifts on the wind and claims its victims among combatants and civilians without discrimination.

Nor is its impact swift. It lingers mercilessly, scarring the bodies and minds of its victims and their families for the rest of their lives.

Consider the following heart-wrenching account from a survivor of a chemical attack:

When you hear people shouting the words ‘gas’ or ‘chemicals’ — and you hear those shouts spreading among the people — that is when terror begins to take hold, especially among the children and the women. Your loved ones, your friends, you see them walking and then falling like leaves to the ground. It is a situation that cannot be described — birds began falling from their nests; then other animals, then humans. It was total annihilation.

Several places have become synonymous with the random cruelty of chemical weapons.

Halabja, Saardasht and Ghouta are names that will remain forever etched in our memories as targets of brutal attacks on unarmed and defenceless civilians.

The inhumanity of chemical weapons is an affront to our common humanity. And it compels us to empathise with those who have suffered pain and death as a result of being exposed to such weapons.

For we can all understand the fear of being poisoned. It is a fear that we all share.

This is a message I made clear at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony last December. In accepting the prize on behalf of the OPCW, I paid homage to the victims.

I have also taken measures to raise awareness of the plight of survivors of chemical weapon attacks, and allocated funds from the Nobel Prize for the Victims Assistance Network.

Many of these survivors continue to languish in hospitals with no prospect of full recovery and will live in constant, unremitting pain for the rest of their lives. Their survival amounts only to cheating death, far from embracing life as they had earlier enjoyed it.

Chemical warfare and attacks – against combatants and civilians alike – are indeed a dark page in human history.

If there can be any measure of consolation in the wake of the suffering they have caused it is surely this.

The outrage caused by chemical weapons use during the Iran-Iraq War helped redouble efforts to negotiate a global ban on chemical weapons.

Less than five years after the war ended, the Chemical Weapons Convention was concluded, entering into force in 1997.

Now, 17 years later to the day, this Convention enjoys almost universal adherence.

And the likelihood of any state resorting to chemical weapons has been greatly reduced as these weapons are being consigned forever to history.

More than 80 per cent of declared chemical weapons have now been destroyed.

And destruction of the remaining stockpiles of chemicals weapons is not far over the horizon – it is very much within our reach.

Reaction to the use of chemical weapons in Syria last August amply demonstrated international resolve to remove this threat. It also showed the need for those few countries still outside the Convention to join without delay.

And following Syria's accession to the Convention, the mission to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons has attested to the international community's readiness to make tangible and immediate contributions to this end.

This is a unique undertaking in the history of disarmament – one of which our community of nations can be justly proud.

All these achievements were born of international determination to rid the world of the scourge of chemical weapons.

They are an affirmation of humankind's collective rejection of such brutal weapons to remain in any country's arsenal.

In remembering the many thousands killed by chemical weapons around the world, let us therefore never forget how we can best respect and preserve their memory.

This we can do by ensuring that their children and their children's children experience only the benefits brought about by chemistry – as fertilizer to enrich their crops, as medicine to heal their bodies, and as industry to enhance their prosperity.

And never again as weapons that kill, maim and scar indiscriminately.

Only through our common commitment to building a future that does not forget the past can we prove ourselves truly worthy of the values which bind our common humanity.