

Keynote Speech

19th International Chemical Weapons Demilitarisation Conference (CWD)

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Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is again a pleasure for me to attend this important gathering on the subject of chemical weapons demilitarisation.

For nearly twenty years, this conference has offered a unique opportunity to share both experience and knowledge that can help eliminate chemical weapons.

Allow me to first thank the organisers of this conference, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, for the invitation to address this conference today.

As host for this event, the Government of the United Kingdom has been a staunch supporter of the work of the OPCW, and has greatly contributed to our efforts over the years.

Without the strong backing of States Parties such as the United Kingdom, we would have been unable to record the many achievements across nearly two decades of work.

Yet given the immense challenges that confront not only our Organisation, but also our joint efforts to eliminate chemical weapons, this is not the proper moment for retrospection.

In recent years, we have taken a forward-looking approach as we confront the increasing threats that face our disarmament regime.

We have prepared for the possibility that non-state actors might acquire and use chemical weapons.

We have kept pace with the latest innovations in science and technology, so that our non-proliferation efforts more effectively hinder the ambitions of those who would develop or use chemical weapons.

And crucially, we have worked to recruit top talent within the OPCW, so that our workforce remains fit for our changing purpose.

Against a rapidly evolving threat horizon, these longer-term plans and investments are now paying dividends.

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Given the gravity of many of the issues facing us, I will focus my comments today on the latest state of play concerning some of the most pressing challenges we face, and detail the actions we are taking to address them.

First, as evidenced by reports coming from both Iraq and Syria, it is increasingly clear that chemical terrorism is no longer a theoretical possibility.

The stark reality is that non-state actors are likely developing – and using – chemical weapons.

And worse still, they appear to be doing so with troubling regularity.

Last year, in my remarks to this conference, I stressed the importance of working in unison to address this escalating threat.

To counter chemical terrorism, I highlighted steps we can take to build robust prevention and response capacities across the globe.

Against such actions, I reassert the notion that engaging those involved in weapons programmes of the past can help us to prevent programmes of the future from forming.

And we are aware that many States Parties are scaling up chemical defence capabilities in response to new threats.

I imagine that many of you in this room can be tremendously helpful in this effort.

But our work cannot stop there.

And indeed, it has not.

In response to the recent use of chemical weapons in both Syria and Iraq, we have boosted existing efforts against chemical terrorism, as well as piloted new initiatives.

Let me unpack these a bit.

First, through our long-standing Working Group on Terrorism, the OPCW has long provided a platform for our Member States to discuss how best to address the threat of chemical terrorism.

Recently, the OPCW has tabled a series of comprehensive papers for States Parties to consider major facets of this critical issue, including legal aspects, prevention measures and effective response capabilities.

As prevention of chemical terrorism is a role largely left to States Parties to direct, we are doing our utmost to ensure that appropriate legal structures are in place across the globe.

For without such legal instruments, our States Parties are challenged in their authority to criminalise and prosecute any actions that are banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention.

This is why we work diligently to assist our Member States to put effective legislation and regulations in place.

Beyond these efforts, we are also highlighting ways in which the Chemical Weapons Convention should be used to fortify chemical counter terrorism efforts.

As part of this effort, the OPCW last week published a comprehensive paper that proposed a series of additional measures that the Secretariat and our Member States can take to control toxic chemicals and the facilities used to produce them.

Whether through closer scrutiny of sensitive transfers of scheduled chemicals or exchanging best practices on robust chemical security practices, we are doing our utmost to sensitize States Parties on the methods in which we can narrow the permissive operating environments for use of chemical weapons.

And when it comes to the response to a chemical terror attack, the OPCW is proposing a new approach to support States when and where such incidents might take place.

As you well know, time is of the essence when it comes to response to a chemical attack.

Given that the effects of some toxic chemicals can be quite rapid, victims would need immediate assistance.

Law enforcement must secure and isolate areas to avoid cross-contamination.

Forensic teams must collect evidence for potential investigations.

And authorities must coordinate complex logistics in a very short amount of time, amid conditions that would likely be quite hazardous.

Fulfilling such requirements might be beyond the current capabilities and expertise of many states.

Given its nearly two decades of expertise across all these areas, the OPCW is uniquely suited to assist our Member States to respond to a chemical terrorism incident.

This was the rationale for the OPCW to create a swift and comprehensive response capability.

Entitled the Rapid Response Assistance Team, the OPCW is proposing that a multidisciplinary team deploy on short notice to any Member State requesting such assistance.

Comprised of a group of experts from the OPCW, the Team would be dispatched to the field to support authorities in responding to any such attack or incident.

And its capabilities would be customized to meet the relevant needs of a range of different contingencies.

Health and safety specialists would administer guidance for decontamination or treatment of victims.

Equipped with analytical tools to detect and characterise toxic chemicals, the Team would assist with collection of samples for analysis.

Experts would also give advice for securing an area for forensic examination – a critical function for potential prosecution of such crimes.

And given our strong partnerships with other international and regional organisations, the Team would support a State Party in coordinating efforts with the United Nations and other relevant bodies.

While we have begun to discuss this concept in recent weeks, the reality is that many of these skill sets are not new to the OPCW.

In fact, through our ongoing efforts in Syria, and in neighbouring Iraq, some of these capabilities have been thoroughly field-tested in recent years.

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Let me turn now to some specifics on where we stand vis-à-vis our mission in Syria, and delve further into some other notable OPCW activities in States Parties.

The effort to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons programme continues to command much attention, and rightly so.

You are all well aware that we have achieved full destruction of Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile.

Yet despite this achievement, there are concerns that Syria has not declared the complete contents of its chemical weapons programme.

In light of such concerns, the OPCW Executive Council recently requested that I engage directly with Syrian authorities regarding its chemical weapons declaration.

Following the Council's request this past March, I initiated such consultations with the Syrian Arab Republic on the outstanding issues regarding its declaration, and I will report on the outcome of these talks before next July's Session of the Council.

Our goal throughout this process is clear.

In line with its obligations as a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, Syria is required to submit a declaration to the OPCW that is regarded as complete and transparent by States Parties.

And beyond its declaration, we are also concerned about allegations of chemical weapons use that persist in Syria.

Such allegations are unsettling – and not only pose a threat to civilians in Syria, but also threaten to reverse our disarmament gains in that country.

For nearly two years, the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission, or FFM, has undertaken the arduous task of collecting samples, interviewing witnesses and gathering data on several incidents of alleged use.

The FFM has issued a series of reports that conclude, with a high degree of confidence, that chlorine and mustard agent have been used against Syrian civilians, and that there is a high likelihood that lives have been lost as a result of such attacks.

These conclusions leave us with one critical question.

Who is accountable for these attacks?

Though the FFM's mandate did not extend to identifying those behind these crimes, last year, the international community took decisive action to find answers to these questions.

In August of 2015, upon adoption of Resolution 2235, the UN Security Council called for the formation of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, or JIM.

Its task is to identify the governments, individuals or groups that have used chemical weapons in Syria.

Throughout this year, the JIM is carrying out its work, and it is expected to report on the outcome of its investigation to the UN Security Council.

In addition to this work, it is our hope that the JIM's establishment will deter any future chemical weapons attacks amid the conflict in Syria, and further afield.

This work, and our continuing efforts in Syria, signals that the global norm against chemical weapons remains firmly in place, and that there is zero tolerance for any use of chemical weapons, anywhere, at any time.

The situation in Syria, in tandem with claims of chemical weapons use by Daesh, or ISIS, in Iraq, indicates that action is needed to counter the chemical terrorism threat.

Last year, in response to a chemical weapons attack in August 2015, the Government of Iraq requested the Technical Secretariat to provide technical support to its own investigation.

Following multiple deployments of our experts to Iraq, and drawing from analysis of environmental samples and biomedical samples from victims, the OPCW has concluded that sulphur mustard was used in Iraq.

And, in recognition of growing concerns about the security situation in Libya, there is an intensifying effort among the Technical Secretariat, Libya and other States Parties to accelerate the elimination of remaining Category 2 chemicals in that country.

The use of chemical weapons in Iraq and Syria, compounded with the security situation in Libya, calls for swift action to meet a shifting threat horizon.

In February, Libyan authorities contacted the Technical Secretariat to advise that, due to several factors, Libya would be unable to meet the deadline for destruction of its remaining Category 2 chemicals.

Citing its lack of technical capacity, as well as concerns over its deteriorating security situation and environmental safety, Libya requested our support for the elimination of its remaining chemical precursors.

In response, the OPCW has been in close contact with the Libyan National Authority regarding the security of its chemical stocks, and we are working together with Libya regarding options for destruction.

This is an urgent matter, particularly when we consider the ambitions of extremists to foment fear and terror within the region.

Amid all these complex situations, we are compelled to recalibrate our thinking of how we reach chemical zero, and to achieve a world free from chemical weapons.

For as important as the efforts of the United States and Russia are to reduce the threat of their stockpile of nerve agents from ever being used, so too is our work to harness the Convention's authority to hinder the ambitions of terrorists.

In a promising new initiative, the OPCW and its States Parties have established an Advisory Board on Education and Outreach.

This Board was formed in recognition of the growing role that the OPCW must play in extending our reach to a broad new set of stakeholders.

For to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons, we require the participation and vigilance of vast new audiences.

By fostering new avenues for outreach, we hope to instil the next generation of scientists, educators, researchers and diplomats with a sense of ownership in the Convention's aims and objectives.

Following the Board's inaugural meeting last month, we anticipate this new body will support our work well into the future.

Also, earlier this month, the OPCW convened one of our most noteworthy and well-attended outreach events to date.

Marking the nineteenth anniversary of the founding of the Organisation, this three-day conference at our headquarters in The Hague assembled many of our most important stakeholders under one roof.

Convening scientists, industry representatives, civil society and diplomats, the conference served to remind us all that ensuring global chemical security is a role assigned to us all.

Put simply, we each have a stake in preventing chemical weapons from re-emerging.

And as many of you – as experts in this field – have unique and valuable expertise in chemical demilitarisation, we will continue to count on your support for these efforts in the months and years to come.

For there is no question that our chemical disarmament agenda is shifting rapidly.

And in addition to the mounting menace of chemical terrorism, our regime must rise to respond to new challenges in our mission to eradicate chemical weapons.

For instance, how do we retain the unique knowledge and skills among those in this highly technical field?

Can we take the expertise from demilitarisation and adapt it to counter the chemical terrorism threat?

And crucially on this last point, how can we collaborate in a smarter fashion with industry, security organisations and States Parties to reduce the non-state actor threat?

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Dear colleagues,

These are some among the many questions that will shape the next phase of our ongoing mission.

As important stakeholders in this work, I encourage you to deliberate on these challenges, collaborate with one another, and formulate practical solutions.

The OPCW will continue to host such discussions, and serve as the global centre of excellence for such efforts.

With that, I thank you for your attention, and wish you a fruitful conference ahead.