



ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Meeting on the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons

Address by Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü, OPCW Director-General

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REMARKS AS DELIVERED

H.E. Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of France,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

At the outset, I wish to express my gratitude to the Government of France for inviting me to this meeting.

25 years ago, representatives of the international community gathered in Paris to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention. They did so in the hope of banishing forever a means of warfare that had demonstrated its brutality time and time again. The signing ceremony signified our collective commitment to ending, once and for all, an evil whose devastation had been magnified many times over by the misuse of the tools of modern science and industry.

In 1997, within four years of the signing ceremony, the Convention entered into force and the longstanding customary norm against the use of poison as a weapon assumed the authority of an international legal obligation. Today, almost every country in the world - 192 in all - subscribes to this global ban on chemical weapons that also establishes an uncompromising prohibition on their use.

The journey that began here over two decades ago has crossed many milestones. With 96 percent of the declared chemical warfare agents having been verifiably destroyed, we are on the verge of an historic achievement; the total elimination of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction is within our reach. This stands as a tribute to the human spirit that values the building of a humane global society.

We have reached this stage as a result of years of dedicated work and a strong commitment to eliminating any possibility of the use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world.

The incidents of their use that have recently come to light are a matter of grave concern.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has been charged with the

responsibility to protect the integrity of the Convention and to monitor its faithful implementation. It is our duty to ensure that the legal obligations assumed by States Parties are being adhered to and to uphold and preserve the norm without fear or favour. We are also under an obligation to conduct our work objectively and impartially.

In 2013, it was confirmed that the nerve agent sarin had been used to devastating effect on the civilian population in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus.

Despite a successful demilitarisation mission conducted subsequently in concert with the United Nations and with the support of over 30 States Parties and the European Union, a most challenging aspect of our continuing involvement in Syria is the work relating to investigating reports of use of chemical weapons.

I have consistently drawn attention to the fact that the OPCW was carrying out investigations in Syria on reports of alleged use of chemical weapons despite the difficult and dangerous circumstances of an active conflict zone.

This was simply because inaction on our part would be tantamount to sanctioning impunity and was therefore unacceptable. I remain firm in that view.

In 2014, I established a Fact-Finding Mission or FFM to investigate allegations of use of chlorine as a chemical weapon in Syria. Since that time, some 20 separate missions have been deployed. This includes investigations conducted at the request of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Having examined a significant number of incidents, the FFM has substantiated several cases of the use of toxic chemicals as weapons and incidents involving sulfur mustard. The FFM also established the use of sarin earlier last year at Khan Shaykhun and Ltamenah.

The security of our teams has always been a matter of serious concern, with the first of our Fact Finding Missions having been subjected to an armed attack. Consequently, investigations have followed procedures suited to the realities on the ground.

There are several methods and procedures that have been used by the FFM to gather information, data, and evidence. It has conducted interviews of carefully selected individuals who may be affected, or witnesses, treating physicians or first responders. It has collected all pertinent information, and where applicable secured biomedical and environmental samples. The samples gathered in the course of these investigations have been transported to the OPCW Laboratory, and then further distributed to our designated laboratories for analysis. Since 2013, these laboratories have collectively conducted over 1,000 analyses. These procedures are consistent with internationally accepted standards of fact finding enquiries.

When I established the FFM four years ago, all States Parties concurred with this mechanism. It has done work that is vital to the preservation of the norms of the Convention.

At present, the FFM is looking into a number of reported incidents, and will submit its conclusions once finalised. Its work will continue in case there are further credible reports of use of chemical weapons.

The international community has forcefully condemned any use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances.

Both the Executive Council and the UN Security Council have by consensus recognised the facts

about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It is on this basis that the UN Security Council had established the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism in August 2015.

It took us over a century to finally achieve an effective and universal ban on chemical weapons and two decades of hard work to bring us to a point at which this norm is now considered inviolable. When chemical weapons are used, the international community must act in accordance with the legal regime that prohibits any violations.

Another crucial aspect of our on-going work in Syria relates to the question of clarifying certain elements of Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme. A group of experts known as the Declaration Assessment Team has been engaged with the Syrian authorities in an effort to clarify several outstanding issues.

We are seeking to establish a declaration that will be regarded by our States Parties as complete and accurate. I have continued to underscore to my Syrian interlocutors the necessity of bringing this matter to closure through the provision of scientifically and technically plausible explanations regarding the identified gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies.

Progress continues to be incremental. However, we have not yet reached our goal and remain, at this point in time, unable to describe the declaration as accurate and complete.

Mr Chairperson,

The Chemical Weapons Convention constitutes a permanent and global prohibition against chemical weapons. There can be no exceptions to its rules.

I have consistently stressed the need for the international community to act with unity in preserving the global norm against chemical weapons. To that end, it is important to hold the perpetrators to account. It is not only a matter of preserving universal respect for our solemn commitments and obligations, it is also our moral duty to ensure that the protections against cruelty and suffering that the Convention has created are universally available to all peoples.

Thank you.
