The OPCW and the Chemical Weapons Convention: Achievements and Challenges

Lecture by OPCW Director-General
Belarusian State University

19 May 2014

Distinguished guests,
Dear students,

I am very grateful for this opportunity to address you here at the Belarusian State University.

Your institution is at the forefront of tertiary education in Belarus. Many of you will go on to careers that will lead and shape your country's future and its engagement with the rest of the world.

Multilateral efforts to advance international peace and security will be an important field of endeavour in this regard. It is a field in which Belarus has long played an active role – not just since gaining independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but from the time of the founding of the United Nations as the Belorussian SSR.

Of special note, Belarus showed admirable commitment to nuclear non-proliferation in transferring all of its Soviet-era tactical warheads to the Russian Federation.

And Belarus is an active and committed member of the Chemical Weapons Convention. It has shared, and continues to share, its expertise with other members in support of cooperative activities to advance implementation of the Convention.

Many of you may not have been familiar with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW, and its work in implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention until last year, when the OPCW received the Nobel Peace Prize and was called on to lead international efforts to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons programme.

These have been truly momentous developments for the OPCW. They have significantly raised the level of public understanding of our important mission to achieve a world completely free of chemical weapons.

But, behind these developments, stands a seventeen-year history of achievement. Let me take some time to elaborate here on our mission and how, together with our Member States, we have been able to make this Organisation what it is today.

****

The tangible achievements of the Chemical Weapons Convention since it came into force in 1997 illustrate that chemical disarmament and non-proliferation are far from utopian ideals, but practical and attainable objectives.

But these achievements, which I will list shortly, have a long prehistory.

Negotiation of a comprehensive global ban against chemical weapons was the result of efforts spanning a century. The earliest initiatives to control or prohibit the use of poisonous weapons date back to the 1868 St Petersburg Declaration and The Hague Peace Conferences at the end of the nineteenth century.

While The Hague Convention of 1899 banned the use of poisonous gases in warfare, widespread use of chemical weapons on both the Western and Eastern Fronts of World War One led to efforts to obtain a stronger norm. These resulted in the 1925 Geneva Protocol.

The Geneva Protocol prohibits the use of chemical and biological weapons, but it does not proscribe the production, development or stockpiling of such weapons. It failed, therefore, to prevent huge stockpiles of chemical weapons from being amassed during the Cold War. Tragically, such weapons were also often used – most extensively, during the Iran-Iraq War, including against civilians, as witnessed in the towns of Sardasht and Halabja.

These tragic events spurred the international community on to come up with a comprehensive ban that would eliminate the threat posed by these heinous weapons.

The conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1992 and its entry into force in 1997 were a major milestone in this regard. The Convention represented an unprecedented legal instrument for disarmament on the basis of several landmark provisions.

First of all, the Convention is comprehensive. It not only bans the use of chemical weapons – it also prohibits their development, production, stockpiling and transfer.

Secondly, the Convention is non-discriminatory. This means that all Member States have exactly the same rights and the same obligations. Any Member State that possesses chemical weapons must destroy its stockpiles within timeframes set by all Member States.

Thirdly, the Convention is backed by an international verification regime. The OPCW is tasked not only to verify destruction of chemical weapons, but also to conduct inspections of relevant industrial facilities to verify that they are engaged exclusively in purposes not prohibited under the Convention.

Fourthly, the Convention commits its Member States to provide assistance to each other, should chemical weapons ever be used, or threatened to be used, against them. At the same time, in recognition of chemistry being a key driver of economic development, the Convention seeks to promote international cooperation on peaceful uses of chemistry through exchanges of knowledge and expertise.

And finally, the Convention established an independent international organisation to oversee its implementation and promote compliance – the OPCW.

These provisions comprise a comprehensive baseline for making the Convention and the work of the OPCW an effective barrier against an

entire category of weapons of mass destruction. But what has helped us convert this baseline into practical success has been the firm commitment of Member States to a world free of chemical weapons, and the traditions of transparency and consensus this has fostered.

****

To give you a sense of how the Convention and the work of the OPCW contribute to the broader cause of international peace and security, I will touch upon the main areas of our activities and highlight our achievements to date.

One of the core responsibilities of the OPCW is to verify the destruction of all declared chemical weapons. Any Member State that possesses chemical weapons must provide a detailed declaration of its stockpiles to the OPCW within 30 days of joining the Convention.

To date, our inspectors have verified the destruction of some 82% of all declared chemical weapons among the eight Member States that have declared chemical weapons on their territory. Albania, India and a State Party, which has requested anonymity, have already completed the destruction of their stockpiles. Iraq is developing a plan for destroying remnants of chemical weapons on its territory. Libya has completed destruction of its chemical weapons, with only some component chemicals left to be eliminated.

The two major possessor States – Russia and the United States – are both progressing steadily towards complete destruction of their stockpiles, in

accordance with a revised decision adopted by our Member States in 2011. I witnessed this first hand during a recent visit to a newly opened destruction facility in Kizner in Russia.

And, finally, the mission to remove and destroy Syrian chemical weapons is well underway.

To ensure that chemical weapons are never again manufactured, the OPCW also routinely conducts inspections of industrial facilities which produce toxic chemicals and precursors that could be used in chemical weapons. Our inspectors have so far undertaken such inspections at more than 2,500 facilities of interest in more than 80 countries.

At the same time, the OPCW implements a monitoring regime covering global exports and imports of chemicals that are relevant to the Convention. Transfer of certain chemicals, classified according to the possibility that they could be used as chemical weapons, is strictly controlled among Member States and, in certain cases, prohibited with those very few States that are not members of the Convention.

While the Convention aims at preventing misuse of chemistry, it by no means intends to hamper the economic or technological development of its Member States. On the contrary, the Convention specifically provides, as I have already mentioned, for the promotion of international cooperation in the field of chemical activities for peaceful purposes.

International cooperation in the promotion of the peaceful uses of chemistry is an important programme area of the OPCW. Activities in this area are of special interest to OPCW Member States with economies

in transition. Here, too, the OPCW has been quite successful through a large number of well targeted programmes aimed at increasing expertise and technical capacity at the national level.

This includes training for chemists and engineers in industrial best practices to safely manage chemicals in a complex industrial environment, as well as programmes designed to enhance analytical skills in chemistry. Other programmes provide funding for research projects and internships for qualified people at world-class research institutions.

Overall, OPCW activities in this area help engender a sense of belonging and ownership amongst our Member States.

Likewise, our efforts, in accordance with the Convention, to provide assistance and protection are a vital part of our mission. This comprises training, coordinating mechanisms and activities designed to enhance Member States' preparedness and capabilities for reacting to a chemical attack or incident, as well as for providing emergency assistance.

Despite the strength of the norm against chemical weapons, the risk of criminal or terrorist use of either chemical weapons or toxic chemicals as chemical weapons is very real. This was brought home to us by the sarin attacks in the Tokyo subway in 1995, and by the undertaking by some terrorist groups to acquire and use such weapons.

****

Confirmed use of chemical weapons in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta last August has nonetheless shown that our success cannot reach beyond our membership.

What occurred in Syria reminded us that failure to account for chemical weapons in even one country outside the Convention can have tragic consequences.

International reaction to these brutal attacks has also reminded us that chemical weapons are unacceptable in any quarter, and that the world's nations are prepared to invest heavily in ensuring they are eliminated.

Syria's accession to the Convention was the first step in achieving this objective. It also presented an unprecedented challenge for the OPCW. Never before have we had to oversee the elimination of a chemical weapons programme amid civil war and in such compressed timeframes.

But, just as the circumstances are unprecedented, so too has been the international effort to secure elimination of Syrian chemical weapons.

Following Syria's move to join the Convention on 14 September, Russia and the United States played a pivotal role in devising a way forward on Syria's chemical demilitarization. Their Framework Agreement paved the way for a historic decision by the OPCW's Executive Council on 27 September on an accelerated programme for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons by mid-2014. This decision was endorsed that same day by unanimous adoption of UN Security Council 2118.

The OPCW was quick off the mark in implementing this programme. The first team of inspectors arrived in Damascus on 1 October, and the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria was established on 16 October.

The mission recorded several early successes ahead of set target dates, including the destruction of all unfilled chemical weapon munitions and the functional destruction of production facilities.

What this means is that Syria is no longer able to produce chemical weapons – a significant milestone that was reached only one month after the Executive Council's 27 September decision.

Furthermore, the Council moved quickly to agree detailed requirements for the destruction programme in a decision taken on 15 November. This key decision calls for the removal of all chemical weapons from Syria, in accordance with a request by the Syrian Government, for destruction outside the country.

The 15 November Council decision entailed putting into place complex arrangements for the transportation and destruction of Syrian chemical weapons – arrangements that have required unprecedented levels of international support and coordination.

Under a transportation and destruction plan supporting the Council decision and the OPCW's Syria Trust Fund, Denmark and Norway are providing vessels and, along with Russia, China and the United Kingdom, military escorts for the transportation of the chemicals.

Mustard agent and priority chemicals are being transported to the Italian port of Gioia Tauro for trans-loading to a US vessel for destruction at sea. This will involve a process of hydrolysis – breaking down chemical agents with hot water and a caustic compound. The resulting effluent will be transported to other destinations for disposal.

Some of the priority chemicals will be transported to the United Kingdom for disposal at commercial facilities in that country. Germany has so far offered to receive effluent resulting from destruction of mustard agent for disposal on its territory.

All other chemicals – largely industrial toxic chemicals – will be treated and disposed of by commercial companies. At the request of the Executive Council, the OPCW initiated a tender process, backed by the OPCW's Syria Trust Fund. This process resulted in the award of contracts to two commercial entities, Ekokem of Finland and Veolia Environmental Services of the United States.

There have been well-publicised delays in Syrian shipments of chemicals to the port of Latakia, where they are being loaded onto the Danish and Norwegian vessels. These delays have been due to a variety of reasons, largely related to the security situation.

At this time, 92% of all chemicals designated for destruction have now been removed from Syria, and we are only one shipment away from getting destruction underway. It is imperative that this be done now, in order to achieve destruction as close as possible to the agreed mid-2014 deadline.

Most recently, I established an OPCW mission to establish facts related to allegations of chemical attacks in Syria involving chlorine gas. This mission was agreed to by the Syrian Government and has received strong support from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. A team of inspectors arrived in Syria last week to work within parameters devised by an advance team whose members have been in Damascus since 2 May.

Such missions are crucial as a tangible demonstration of Syria's commitment to the object and purpose of the Convention – and as a means of addressing concerns by the international community in the face of such allegations.

****

The mission to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons is understandably a focus of the OPCW's current efforts. However, it has not distracted us from preparing for new challenges ahead.

First and foremost, the use of chemical weapons in Syria has yet again reminded us that our success can only be as broad as our reach.

This means that we must redouble our efforts, with the support of our Member States, to persuade the six countries still outside the Convention to join without delay or preconditions. These countries are Angola, Egypt, Israel, Myanmar, North Korea and South Sudan.

Our message is very clear: there can be no justification for not adhering to what is a solid international norm against a universally abhorred class of weapon.

At the same time, as we get closer to completing destruction of all declared chemical weapons, the OPCW will need to advance further along the path of transition and change. This will require us to adapt as an institution to focus on preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

And we will need to do this in a rapidly changing strategic environment – one in which globalization, rapid scientific and technological advances, and a veritable revolution in communications present as many challenges as they do opportunities.

Major priorities will be tracking the development of new chemical and production technologies, and determining whether they could have an impact on how we implement the Convention. This is not just a question of guarding against the potential for misuse of such technologies, but of possibly adapting them to enhance our verification methodologies and channelling them towards opportunities for cooperation on peaceful uses.

We will also need to further refining our industry verification regime, given the large number of industrial facilities that have been declared to the OPCW. This means that we will need to be creative in how we engage industry as a partner – not only in improving compliance with the Convention, but also in developing proactive strategies to address new chemical production techniques and the expansion of the worldwide chemical industrial sector, as well as realignments in its production base.

All this will require us to further deepen our partnerships with science and industry, partnerships that are already well grounded and broadly based. For instance, a key source of independent advice is the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board, whose members deliberate on a range of matters, ranging from the convergence of biology and chemistry, to education and outreach.

At the same time, we have a unique opportunity to raise awareness of our work in light of the high-profile Syria mission and the award last year of the Nobel Peace Prize to the OPCW.

I attach a very high priority to our efforts in this regard. Not only do we need to broaden our community of stakeholders in policy-making circles, industry, academia and civil society, we also need to be able to inculcate the highest ethical standards in the upcoming generation of scientists and researchers.

That is why it is important that institutions such as the Belarusian State University have in place induction courses and other measures for ensuring that students and researchers understand the relationship between science and security, especially that some scientific discoveries can harm as well as benefit humankind.

With the cooperation of Member States, we will be unrolling tools and materials for awareness-raising, education and outreach purposes, some of which have already been put into practice and have yielded good results.

****

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have outlined to you the key elements of our work, as well as conveyed a sense of the challenges ahead, and how we are positioning ourselves to address them.

But, as I mentioned earlier, the ongoing success of the Convention will depend on maintaining and deepening traditions of transparency and consensus between our Member States. At the same time, it will require an ever broadening community of stakeholders that can work towards all of us having a practical understanding of, and commitment to, ensuring that science is never misused to harm humankind.

You, as the next generation of scientists, diplomats and engineers, will have a key role to play in this collective international effort. I hope that the award last year of the Nobel Peace Prize will inspire you as much as it has us at the OPCW – not only to work for chemical disarmament, but also to strive for more far-reaching achievement in multilateral disarmament. Our goal must be to consign all weapons of mass destruction, all inhumane weapons to history, forever.

On the eve of the centenary of the first large-scale use of chemical weapons near Ieper in Belgium in April 1915, we owe it to ourselves and future generations to ensure that we never risk reliving the horrors that our predecessors experienced.

Thank you for your attention.