



**ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

**United Nations Security Council**

**Statement by the Director-General OPCW,**

**Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü**

**20 March 2018**

**New York**

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*REMARKS AS DELIVERED*

Mr President,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished members of the Security Council,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to address the Security Council. It is indeed a pleasant coincidence that I do so under the Presidency of The Netherlands – the country that hosts the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). I wish you Mr President every success in your endeavours.

The mandate of the OPCW to bring about a comprehensive and sustained prohibition on chemical weapons is indispensable to the objectives of the United Nations for the promotion of international peace and security. The OPCW and the United Nations are committed to working together to serve these goals.

The OPCW supported the United Nations in the investigation of use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013 under the Secretary-General's mechanism. The findings proved that sarin was used in Ghouta against unarmed civilians to deadly effect. International public opinion was rightly outraged.

Syria's accession to the Convention in the wake of the Ghouta attacks marked a new phase in the progress towards the global elimination of chemical weapons.

The magnitude of the undertaking and the timelines chosen to accomplish it were unprecedented. The task was assigned to an entity jointly operated by the OPCW and the UN. The OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria represents an outstanding example of close cooperation between the two

organisations. It was ably led, Mr President, in her capacity as Special Coordinator by your compatriot and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands, Ms Sigrid Kaag.

Despite an ongoing civil war, we undertook an ambitious chemical demilitarisation mission to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons programme. This complex and challenging assignment involved removal and destruction of chemical weapons outside the territory of Syria. It was supported by no less than 30 Member States and the European Union.

The work of the Joint Mission and, let me stress, all of our current endeavours in Syria continue to be guided by the decisions of the OPCW Executive Council and UNSCR 2118 (2013)- both adopted on 27 September 2013. Importantly, these decisions recognise the exceptional nature of the work in Syria and authorise the steps necessary to achieve the defined goals.

The mission in Syria was designed to have concluded sometime in 2014. Yet we continue to grapple with a number of difficult issues both technical and political.

Members of the Council are fully aware of historical and current developments in our work in Syria through regular briefings and the mandated reports. This includes my monthly report submitted to the Council through the UN Secretary General.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria continues to defy comprehension and to challenge the international community.

The most tangible and visible manifestation of the value of the CWC is the verification of destruction of nearly the entire global stockpile of chemical weapons. The use of chemical weapons today is therefore an outrage that must not be tolerated. It is an abomination and it threatens to unravel a singular achievement in the history of disarmament.

The creation and continuation of the Fact Finding Mission embodies the commitment of the international community to prevent the erosion of this hard-earned progress.

It was in the face of persistent and credible allegations that chlorine was being used in Syria as a chemical weapon that I established a Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in April 2014.

Since that time, the FFM has looked into no less than 74 allegations. Following a process of rigorous and critical evaluation these incidents were selected from some 390 recorded allegations for further systematic investigation. Cases were chosen on the basis of the credibility of the reports and the likelihood of direct access to information and evidence including witnesses.

In 2014, the FFM in its report dated 10 September determined with a high degree of confidence that chlorine had been used in Syria as a weapon. This investigation looked at incidents of use in the villages of Talmanes, Al Tamanah, and Kafr Zeta in northern Syria. Both the Executive Council and the Security Council took cognisance of this situation.

The strong condemnation by the Security Council in its resolution 2209 (2015) and the establishment of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism through resolution 2235 (2015) represented a response that was consistent with the gravity of the situation. Although this mechanism no longer exists, its underlying objectives remain valid.

Over the last three years incidents of the use of chemical weapons or use of toxic chemicals as weapons have been carefully investigated and well documented.

These are worth recalling.

The FFM issued two reports in October 2015. In one report, it concluded that a toxic chemical, probably chlorine, had likely been used as a weapon in the Idlib Governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic. In the other, it determined the likely use of mustard by a non-state actor in Marea. In May 2017, the FFM confirmed the use of sulfur mustard in Um Hosh and in June, the use of sarin in Khan Shaykhun. In another report in November, it pointed to the likelihood of use of sarin in Ltamenah.

The methods and procedures used by the FFM to gather information, data, and evidence are science based and are in conformity with standard instructions for investigations of alleged use of chemical weapons. These have been developed pursuant to the Verification annex of the CWC. This includes stringent protocols applying both objective criteria and standard questionnaires for such an investigation. Additionally, evidence is prioritised based on relevance in accordance with approved OPCW procedures, and re-evaluated according to the degree of separation in the chain of custody between the source and receipt by the team.

The most extreme circumstances confront any type of international investigation in Syria. Security is a primary concern as there is not a single authority exercising effective control over the various areas where these allegations emerge.

The differing circumstances surrounding each allegation justify assignment of appropriate relevance to methods from a range of those available in an inspector's tool kit. All members of the FFM are highly skilled, trained and experienced professionals.

They have chosen to volunteer for these missions despite the known risks to their safety. They represent, within the constraints of resources and the availability of the necessary skills set, the geographical diversity of our membership.

The nature and circumstances of the various incidents looked into by the FFM has varied significantly. On the whole, the FFM conducts interviews of carefully selected individuals falling in different categories including victims, affectees, treating physicians and first responders. In relation to investigations concerning areas not controlled by the Syrian government, there is no option but to work with other parties to access witnesses. This is foreseen in the relevant decisions of the Executive Council and the Security Council. Witness selection and collection, scrutiny and cross checking of testimonies follows rigorous procedures and accords with international standards of legal probity.

When circumstances have permitted, sampling and analysis have been crucial.

Samples taken in support of investigations are transported to the OPCW Laboratory, where each sample is split into multiple aliquots. Identical sets of samples are then sent to 2 of the OPCW designated laboratories for analysis.

The OPCW's network of designated laboratories is highly capable and has the ability to analyse environmental and bio-medical samples. Currently 25 laboratories from 19 Member States are part of this network; 13 of these are designated for both bio-medical and environmental analysis. Since 2013, these laboratories have collectively conducted over 1000 analyses.

The role of the OPCW in investigating the brutal chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun last April has been variously commented upon. I consider it opportune to restore the perspective. When credible reports emerged about this incident on 4 April 2017, I immediately instructed the FFM to examine all available information with a view to a prompt determination about a possible investigation.

An initial FFM had deployed within 24 hours of being alerted to the incident. The main team left soon thereafter for a neighbouring country, where casualties had been transported. Rapid mobilisation enabled the FFM to attend the autopsies of three victims and to witness the extraction of biomedical specimens from the bodies. The FFM visited three hospitals to interview patients and collected relevant biomedical specimens and associated testimony.

The bio-medical samples collected from three victims during their autopsy were analysed at two OPCW designated laboratories. Bio-medical samples from seven individuals undergoing treatment at hospitals were also analysed in two other OPCW designated laboratories. The most robust chain of custody is documented in this case.

At a meeting of the Executive Council on 19 April, which was less than 2 weeks after the incident, I informed the Council that the analyses from four different OPCW designated laboratories indicated exposure to Sarin. And while further details of the laboratory analyses were to follow, the analytical results that had already been obtained were incontrovertible.

The FFM went on to complete its detailed enquiry and to issue its report in June 2017 confirming the earlier findings about the use of sarin in Khan Shaykhun.

Early and direct access to the site of an alleged incident remains an ideal. It has however not been possible in Syria due to the on-going armed conflict.

In May 2014, the very first FFM attempted to visit a site of an alleged incident involving the use of chlorine. This part of the mission had to be aborted due to a serious armed attack on the team when one of its vehicles was destroyed by a roadside IED and another ambushed.

A part of the contingent was also temporarily detained by an armed group. FFM team members were extremely fortunate to have escaped this ordeal unharmed.

Despite the obvious security risks but given the gravity of the incident, a site visit to Khan Shaykhun was under serious consideration. Arrangements for a possible deployment were at an advanced stage in coordination with the United Nations Department for Safety and Security.

A site visit was rendered unnecessary once it became clear that the use of sarin was not in dispute. This was evident from the position of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic which provided to the FFM its own information and materials as evidence. According to the Syrian authorities, an unnamed volunteer had collected these samples in Khan Shaykhun. A video recording of the collection of the samples was provided to the FFM. These environmental samples included soil, fragments of metal, bone, and vegetation collected from the vicinity of the impact site. The analysis of these samples by the OPCW laboratory and the results from Syria's own analysis were broadly consistent in confirming the presence of sarin.

The mandate of the FFM is confined to establishing only the fact of the use of chemical weapons. Since the fact about the use of sarin was uncontested, any further corroboration of the same through a high risk site deployment became redundant. This led me to call off the deployment of the FFM which was already in Damascus in a state of readiness.

There have since been other reports about use which the FFM continues to monitor and enquire into.

Since early 2014, the quantum of work performed by the FFM includes 33 deployments, interviews of over 376 witnesses from diverse areas and backgrounds, collection and analysis of 257 samples and a wide array of information and data which has been subjected to rigorous scientific and technical analytical methods.

Never before has the use of chemical weapons been subjected at this scale to such close, systematic and objective scrutiny.

Several of the incidents covered by the FFM were further investigated by the JIM - according to its own mandate - and confirmed in its reports to this Council. The same reports were also forwarded to the OPCW Executive Council on the basis of which it adopted a decision in November 2016 mandating additional inspections in Syria.

Recently, and at the request of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic, a special mission was deployed to Syria to look into the discoveries of chlorine cylinders and some munitions as reported by the Syrian authorities. OPCW experts visited five different sites in the Homs region. The team observed that the 42 cylinders in question had not been altered from their original commercially available design. The munitions observed did not display the specific features expected to be found on those designed for the use of chemical weapons. The team concluded that none of the observed items and the sites visited were therefore declarable under the relevant provisions of the CWC.

I will take this opportunity to also inform the Council about the current status of our work concerning the Syrian Arab Republic's declaration of its chemical weapons programme in order

to ensure that it is complete and accurate. This work has been assigned to a team of experts called the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT).

Since early 2014, there has been sustained engagement between DAT and the Syrian authorities evident in 19 deployments and numerous rounds of discussions in both The Hague and Damascus. At the request of the Executive Council, I have met the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mr Feysal Mekdad and his delegation on three separate occasions. While some issues have been clarified, key questions and concerns remain unresolved.

There are three clusters of such issues as follows:

- (a) the role of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) in the Syrian chemical weapons programme;
- (b) the results of analyses of samples collected at multiple locations in the Syrian Arab Republic; and
- (c) other chemical weapons-related activities that occurred prior to the Syrian Arab Republic's accession to the Convention that need to be declared.

On the basis of reasons made credible by the work of the DAT, some parts of the SSRC have now been declared as relevant to its chemical weapons programme. SSRC was not included in the original declaration submitted by Syria.

The information provided by Syria so far remains general and not sufficient to clarify the nature and extent of chemical weapons research and development activities. There remain questions also about undeclared agents whose indicators were found in the samples collected at SSRC as well as an undeclared chemical warfare agent that emerges from the information provided by Syria.

Separately, but related to the SSRC, the Secretariat has conducted two rounds of inspections at its facilities in pursuance of Executive Council decision adopted on 11 November 2016. The first took place from February to March last year and the second concluded in November.

As regards the second cluster of issues, the results of analyses of samples collected by DAT at multiple locations indicated potential undeclared chemical weapons-related activities involving production and/or weaponisation of chemical warfare agents at those locations. Sufficient and scientifically and technically plausible Information that would explain these findings is still awaited.

The third outstanding cluster relates to verifying the precise quantity of chemical weapons that were destroyed or consumed prior to the Syrian Arab Republic's accession to the Convention. This includes the fate of 2,000 aerial bombs designed for chemical weapons purposes. These were reportedly repurposed for conventional use. In the absence of relevant documents and physical evidence, the Secretariat has not been able to verify that that these munitions were in fact repurposed and consumed. The same applies to excessive quantities of chemical warfare

agents and munitions reportedly destroyed or consumed in performance testing activities prior to the Syrian Arab Republic's accession to the Convention.

While the Syrian Arab Republic has remained engaged with the Secretariat, the nature and substance of information provided thus far does not enable a resolution of the identified gaps, inconsistencies, or discrepancies in its declaration. The Secretariat therefore remains unable to state that the Syrian Arab Republic has submitted a declaration that can be considered accurate and complete.

I have continued to underscore to my Syrian interlocutors the necessity of bringing this matter to a closure. This is possible through the provision of scientifically and technically plausible explanations and provision of appropriate documentation relating to the unresolved questions. It is also important for us to have access to individuals with an overarching knowledge of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.

Mr President,

Allow me to conclude by once again thanking you and the Council for this opportunity to brief you.

The tools available to the international community to investigate and to inform have not been found wanting. And there is no haze surrounding the big picture. Those who use chemical weapons to perpetrate violence must be held accountable for their actions. This is the responsibility of the policy making organs that have been vested with the authority to ensure respect for international legal norms and to serve the ends of international peace and security.

There also needs to be concord in the reception to the findings that are submitted to the policy forums. This will serve the larger interests of the international system and strengthen the morale of those who take great risks to perform their assignments with dedication and professionalism.

Our on-going endeavours in Syria signify the determination of the international community to uphold the absolute prohibition on chemical weapons. This is a norm that it took nearly a century of hard work and persistence to fully codify in the CWC. It has taken us a further quarter of a century to ensure universal support for the Convention. We are all under an obligation to not only prevent the erosion of its norms but to make them stronger and lasting.

Current political differences notwithstanding, the international community must have in place an appropriate mechanism to hold accountable those who choose to wilfully break the rules that are foundational to civilised coexistence.

Thank you

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