

Ieper Commemorative Gathering

Director-General's Statement

Your Excellency Mr. Minister,
Honourable Mayor,
Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,

One hundred years ago, in fields near Ieper, humankind witnessed the advent of a new kind of warfare.

On the 22nd of April 1915, chemical weapons were used for the first time on a large scale.

It was to become the first of many similar attacks over the course of World War I – in the east of Europe, as in the west, by one side to the conflict, as by the other.

Tragically, World War I was only the opening chapter in a century-long history of chemical warfare.

Thousands of people came to know the torment and fear caused by chemical weapons – as combatants, and as innocent civilians.

And many survivors continue to suffer, their injuries serving as a permanent reminder of the horrific and indiscriminate impact of these barbarous weapons.

Ieper has become synonymous with the birth of chemical warfare.

It is for this reason that we have gathered here today.

To honour the memory of victims of chemical weapons, and to ensure that their deaths and sufferings are never forgotten.

In doing so, we recommit ourselves – through the Declaration we will issue at this gathering – to tireless efforts to prevent any person from ever again experiencing the cruelty of such weapons.

Certainly, we have travelled a long way towards this goal since Ieper.

We had to live for many decades under the threat of massive chemical arsenals one day being used on an unimaginable scale.

But at the end of diplomatic efforts spanning almost a century, the Chemical Weapons Convention has since 1997 presented a bulwark for ridding the world of these terrible weapons.

We have built up, from scratch, a verification and monitoring regime that inspires confidence and renders tangible results.

We have developed a network of assistance and protection that enhances global security.

We have fostered international cooperation that encourages science to always work in the service of peace.

And as a result of the strength of international consensus, the long-cherished goal of complete chemical disarmament is now fast approaching.

But the eradication of declared chemical weapon stockpiles, within the next eight years, will not signal the end of our mission.

Rather, it will drive us to make our remarkable gains in chemical disarmament permanent.

For our success cannot be measured only in weapons destroyed.

It must extend to preventing new weapons from being developed, and from being built.

It must anticipate new developments in science and technology, and it must defend against the evil designs of non-State actors.

But there are more challenges ahead.

It is difficult to comprehend that six States have not yet acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

No-one can justify withholding adherence to a norm that makes no exception or special privilege for any State.

And no State can afford to leave any doubt about its intentions in relation to chemical weapons.

We must work tirelessly towards achieving universal adherence to the global ban against chemical weapons.

And we must reinforce this global norm, with relevant international bodies, by holding all States and non-State actors accountable for any action that goes against it.

Simply put, we cannot allow our success to be restricted by our reach.

Further, to remove completely the possibility of recourse to chemical weapons, we need to build on, and deepen, trust between nations by promoting peaceful uses of science.

Advances in the chemical sciences must serve exclusively to benefit humankind, and never again to harm it.

The ethical foundations of the ban against chemical weapons must be actively applied in all forms of scientific endeavour in the pursuit of our security and prosperity.

And, finally, we need to broaden our community of stakeholders to make chemical disarmament a truly collective endeavour, engaging industry, universities and civil society, as well as governments and other relevant international organisations.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to thank the Government of Belgium and the Mayor of Ieper for the generous support they have extended to the OPCW for this historic event.

The fact that we are meeting here, under the auspices of this noble treaty and the remarkable successes it has recorded, is testimony to the strength of our resolve.

We have turned the legacy of chemical warfare begun at Ieper into a future that will never again know such weapons.

I hope that the Ieper Declaration issued at this meeting will serve to inspire us further as we work to make our world truly free of chemical weapons.

To heed the lessons of history, to leave behind what has divided us, and to embrace what has united us.

Thank you.