

Statement by the OPCW to the Fourth Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear-Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction

New York, 18 - 22 November 2024

Mr. President,

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to address you on behalf of the Director General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (the OPCW), Ambassador Fernando Arias.

Let me also extend congratulations to you, Mr. President, for your election to this post.

Mr. President,

The Chemical Weapons Convention is a key pillar of the international multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation architecture.

The Convention bans an entire category of weapons of mass destruction under stringent international verification.

All States Parties have committed to never develop, produce, acquire, stockpile, or use chemical weapons, or transfer them to anyone.

They have also obligated themselves to declare and destroy any chemical weapons they own or possess, or that they abandoned on the territory of other States Parties. They also committed to destroy or convert facilities involved in the production of such weapons.

Since the entry into force of the Convention in 1997, the OPCW has been overseeing the implementation of these obligations in support of the ultimate objective of completely excluding the possibility of the use of chemical weapons.

In this sense, the Convention remains directly relevant to establishing a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East.

We are pleased to attend this Conference, and its intersessional meetings, and support of your efforts.

Mr. President,

On 7 July 2023, the last chemical munition declared under the Convention was destroyed.

This completed the destruction of an entire category of declared weapons of mass destruction.

With more than 72,000 metric tonnes of chemical weapons destroyed under international verification this was a major achievement for both the OPCW and for multilateral diplomacy.

Our work continues in relation to verifying the destruction of old and abandoned chemical weapons as a consequence of the World Wars.

With the completion of declared chemical weapons stockpiles, the Secretariat has shifted its focus and aligned its priorities to the prevention of re-emergence of chemical weapons.

At the same time, we must retain and preserve our demilitarisation expertise.

This will enable the Organisation to maintain its readiness for the possible accession of a new possessor State.

Preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons takes many forms.

The cornerstone of these efforts is the Convention's industry verification regime.

All States Parties are required to declare industrial activities and facilities of relevance to the Convention and its schedules of chemicals.

The Secretariat analyses and validates these industry declarations.

Through on-site inspections of chemical facilities around the world, the Secretariat verifies the accuracy of these declarations and provides confidence in the adherence to the Convention.

This year we are on track to complete the planned 200 industry inspections.

Since entry into force we have conducted more than 4,700 inspections in more than 80 countries.

Nonetheless, this is only one element in our preventive efforts.

In parallel we continue to strengthen the capacity of our States Parties with respect to national implementation of the Convention, assistance and protection against chemical weapons and the peaceful uses of chemistry, through our international cooperation and assistance programmes.

National implementation of the Convention is the first line of defence for tackling chemical weapons-related challenges.

Many States Parties from the Middle East region have benefitted from our training and support on legislative issues, on customs authorities training, and assistance with respect to chemical safety and security, among other activities.

In the same vein the Secretariat has conducted a number of activities in the region aimed at building capacity to respond to use of chemical weapons and to incidents involving toxic chemicals.

In addition, the Secretariat's capacity-building programmes promote peaceful uses of chemistry through sharing of knowledge and capacity.

Preventing re-emergence is a multi-stakeholder effort and the Secretariat stands ready to continue its cooperation with all partners in the region.

Mr President,

Over the past decade, chemical weapons have been used in five States Parties, including two in the Middle East, namely Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.

At the request of the government of Iraq the Secretariat deployed in Iraq in 2015 to assist the Iraqi National Authority's independent investigations into the allegations of use of mustard gas.

14 October 2024 marked 11 years since the Syrian Arab Republic became a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

However, our work in Syria is still not complete.

The Secretariat continues to address the Syrian chemical weapons dossier through 3 teams:

- a) The Declaration Assessment Team (DAT)
- b) The Fact-Finding Mission (FFM); and
- c) The Investigation and Identification Team

These three teams will continue their work in accordance with the mandates entrusted to the Secretariat by the Convention and relevant decisions of the policy-making organs of the Organisation.

For more than 10 years now, the Secretariat has been unable to verify that the declarations submitted by the Syrian are accurate and complete.

Of the 26 issues identified by the Secretariat, only seven have been resolved, while 19 issues remain outstanding, some of which are of serious concern.

In addition, the FFM has documented use of chemical weapons in many instances, and the IIT has issued 4 reports identifying the Syrian Armed Forces as using chemical weapons in five instances, and identifying ISIL in one instance.

The identification of ISIL as a perpetrator of chemical attacks in Syria also highlights the ever-present risk posed by non-State actors.

In this context, the work of the OPCW in countering chemical terrorism is relevant.

Our Open-Ended Working Group on Terrorism is a dedicated forum for States Parties to exchange views and discuss measures to prevent and respond such misuse of toxic chemicals.

In addition, we cooperate with relevant regional and international organisations in tackling the use and threat of use of chemical weapons by non-State actors. More detailed information is included in the background paper submitted by the Secretariat to this Session of the Conference and other relevant documents issued by the Organisation and posted on our website.

Mr President,

We live in an age of accelerating scientific and technological progress.

To maintain ability of the Organisation to deliver effectively on its mandates, it is essential that we adapt to these developments, make best use of the opportunities they create and mitigate the risks they present.

Drone-technology, 3-D printing, synthetic biology and quantum computing – to mention a few – are all areas that affect the implementation of the Convention.

Artificial intelligence in particular cuts across all these fields, accelerating development and magnifying impact.

This technology is itself easily accessible, and it has the potential to significantly lower the technological barriers for acquiring and using toxic chemicals.

While bringing innumerable benefits to us all, taken together, these new technologies significantly alter the threat profile facing the Convention.

The Secretariat has taken a proactive approach in addressing these issues.

The OPCW's Scientific Advisory Board has been evaluating AI's potential implications for the Convention for some time.

Further to the Board's recommendations, the Director-General of the OPCW has decided to establish a new temporary working group to assess the transformative impact of this technology on the implementation of the Convention.

On 22 to 24 October this year, the Secretariat organised together with Morocco the first-ever Global Conference on the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Advancing the Implementation of the Convention, held in Rabat.

The outcome of the Conference will form the basis for future discussions among the States Parties on how to keep the verification regime and the capabilities of the Secretariat abreast with science and technology.

Immediately prior to the Rabat Conference, The OPCW and the State of Qatar hosted the eleventh Annual Meeting of Chemical Industry and National Authorities of States Parties, which had a specific focus on emerging technologies.

In July, the States Parties decided to include a standing agenda item on emerging technologies on all future sessions of the Executive Council.

This will be an important vehicle for taking these processes forward.

A vital tool in the Secretariat's continued adaptation is our new Centre for Chemistry and Technology, which was inaugurated on 13 May 2023 in the presence of the King of the Netherlands.

The ChemTech Centre is now fully operational and has already proven its worth by enhancing our ability to maintain a robust verification regime, to conduct research, analysis, and training, as well as deliver capacity building programmes.

It is also the hub for the OPCW's network of designated laboratories, which is a vital for our verification efforts.

On behalf of the Organisation, I want to congratulate Algeria for having obtained designated status for the National Institute of Criminalistics and Criminology of the Gendarmerie Nationale in July 2024, with the support of the OPCW Laboratory Twinning Programme.

Mr. President,

As long as even a single country remains outside the Convention our work is not complete.

Egypt, Israel, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and South Sudan have yet to join the Convention.

The Director-General's engagement with South Sudan has been encouraging, and the Secretariat looks forward to welcoming that country as the 194th State Party as soon as possible.

The Secretariat will continue reaching out to the remaining States not Party and actively promote universal adherence to the Convention.

We encourage all States Parties do the same.

Mr. President,

Achieving and sustaining a world free of chemical weapons requires strong collective efforts by all stakeholders, not only in The Hague but around the globe.

The Secretariat of the OPCW is pleased to continue its participation as an observer in this conference, and we stand ready to contribute and facilitate your important work in any way we can.

I thank you for your attention.
