Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary's speech at the OPCW Special Conference of the States Parties

2018-06-26

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, I really have very little to add after the eloquent intervention from our Spanish colleague, but let me just say that, from my part, the part of the United Kingdom this is a very grave issue.

I just want to remind you all that when the Chemical Weapons Convention came in to force in 1997, we all hoped that these terrible instruments of death would never be used again.

We believed then that the the global ban, which goes back to 1925 and the Geneva Protocol was essential, we believed then that the ban would hold firm.

But the tragic reality is that chemical weapons have been used and are being used all over again and as we have heard attacks have taken place in Syria and Iraq. One category of nerve agent was used to commit murder in Malaysia in 2017; another was used for attempted murder in my own country on March 4.

Over three months after that appalling incident, areas of Salisbury are still being decontaminated and three people are still being treated for the effects of exposure, although they are thankfully out of hospital.

We as the international community cannot ignore these breaches of the Chemical Weapons Convention, hence, I hope you'll agree, the necessity of this special conferences of States Parties.

This is an opportunity to restore the global ban on the use of chemical weapons and strengthen the OPCW's ability to respond to any violations.

I hope that all countries will support the Decision tabled by the UK.

OPCW special session of the Conference of States Parties

The text is the result of extensive collaborations, consultations, with every country, and the Decision:

condemns all chemical weapon attacks wherever they may occur;

confirms our strong backing for the OPCW's vital work;

supports arrangements to attribute responsibility for chemical weapon attacks in Syria, filling the gap left after the ending of the Joint Investigative Mechanism;

calls for greater action to help states to address the threat of chemical terrorism;

and also asks the Director General to develop other proposals before the annual Conference in November, including on how to improve the capacity of the Technical Secretariat and States to implement the Convention.

Following our extensive consultations, the United Kingdom is presenting the proposed text for decision. I understand that that consensus was not possible so there will be a vote of the Conference of State Parties tomorrow.

And I would ask all those present to vote against the other tabled motions, which would render the OPCW toothless and undermine the Technical Secretariat and the Fact-Finding Mission in Syria.

Our aim, by contrast, is to reinforce the OPCW as an institution. Last November, the Security Council was prevented from renewing the Joint Investigative Mechanism, meaning that no international body is working to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

At present, the OPCW's experts will say where and when an attack happened, but not who was responsible.

If we are serious about upholding the ban on chemical weapons, that gap must be filled.

Attributing responsibility for an attack is clearly part of the OPCW's technical remit, requiring no change to the Chemical Weapons Convention. The Director General has confirmed that the OPCW is able and willing to perform this essential task.

We cannot allow the global ban on chemical weapons – a signal achievement of diplomacy – to be eroded away.

What kind of a failure would it be if we were to cast aside in our generation the work of previous generations of diplomats and scientists? What would it say about us if we allowed the emergence of a new taboo, a taboo not on using chemical weapons, but on identifying those responsible?

None of us wants our children to grow up in a world where the use of chemical weapons becomes normalised and I think today, we all have a responsibility to act. Thank you all for your kind attention.

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