Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

22nd Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention

2017-11-27

Thank you Mr Chair,

The United Kingdom supports the statement made by Mr Jacek Bylica on behalf of the European Union.

First, I must thank our Director General, Ahmet Uzumcu for his committed, tireless leadership of the OPCW. He has been a true champion of the Chemical Weapons Convention and of the rules-based international system, at a time when it is under significant challenge. We are fortunate that he will continue to lead the OPCW into the year ahead. The Executive Council has nominated a worthy successor in Fernando Arias of Spain. He will be a strong leader and brings great knowledge of this Organisation and a proven commitment to achieving its goals.

Under Ahmet Uzumcu's leadership the OPCW's Technical Secretariat has made significant progress. Among achievements this year, the OPCW has:

enhanced its Africa Programme. The United Kingdom was pleased to support the OPCW's work to strengthen national capacity building, including training for East African States Parties in Kampala

developed the OPCW Mentorship Programme so it is an established platform for sharing experience, knowledge and ideas. The UK has now participated in two fruitful partnerships, first with Malawi and now with Nigeria

passed a landmark decision on steps that the Technical Secretariat and States Parties should take to address the chemical terrorism threat

begun preparatory work for the fourth Review Conference, through the Open Ended Working Group on Future Priorities. Under the able co-chairs the Ambassadors of Canada and South Africa, the group has provided a helpful forum to identify the challenges ahead for the Convention and the OPCW

approved the addition of data on non-scheduled chemicals to the OPCW Central Analytical Database. This will reduce wasted inspection time, and increase the capability of the

Technical Secretariat in inspections to confirm and identify the presence or use of chemical weapon agents; and finally

marked the completion of the verified destruction of Russia's declared chemical weapons programme, and just last week, the completion of the destruction of Libya's declared precursor chemicals

And yet, the Convention is under unprecedented attack. The excellent work that the OPCW does to build capacity among states parties will be meaningless if we do not stand up now for its fundamental tenet: to rid the world of chemical weapons. As we have celebrated the 20th anniversary of its entry into force, it is shocking that in 2017 the world has witnessed repeated chemical weapons use:

as an illegal weapon of war in Syria

as an instrument of terrorism in Iraq and Syria and

as a means of assassination in Malaysia

The case of Syria should weigh heavily on the conscience of this Conference. This year the Fact Finding Mission has confirmed three chemical weapons attacks in Syria between September 2016 and April 2017. It is investigating many more. The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism determined that Syria was responsible for sarin use at Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017, and Da'esh used sulphur mustard in September 2016. Despite the huge volume of compelling evidence before it, the Executive Council has yet to take any action on Syria this year.

All states parties have taken on a duty to uphold the Convention. That requires action, from us all, here in The Hague. Some have tried to argue that the JIM's findings should only be discussed at the UN Security Council – after, of course, the renewal of its mandate has been vetoed. Those who shout loudest that we should avoid politics, and stick to technical matters, are those who choose to ignore the findings of the technical bodies we have all built.

We must view chemical weapons use in Syria through a technical prism. We must allow the technical experts to do their job, and then we, as states parties, must act on the findings they present to us. The JIM was an expert technical body. The Fact Finding Mission is an expert technical body. Dismissing their findings because they don't fit with the political world view a country happens to hold is hypocrisy.

False argument must not undermine the role of this Organisation. Myths and conspiracy theories have been circulated about the JIM's work. We should stick to facts. The JIM was established in 2015, after careful debate, with the unanimous support of the UN Security Council. Its working methods and practices were made known. It has carried out its work, in

the most challenging circumstances, to produce serious, thorough, technical and compelling reports. The JIM's most recent report into Khan Sheikhoun made clear that they considered the full range of alternative hypotheses. They discarded those narratives that were not supported by the evidence. The Syrian Government itself provided samples from Khan Sheikhoun, and confirmed these as sarin.

Those who now challenge so aggressively the working methods of the JIM and FFM appear to have done so only when it became clear what conclusions those bodies would draw. They have chosen to play politics with these technical bodies, because their findings do not support their global political narrative. As we have seen, Russia has mirrored its three vetoes on the report in the Security Council with attempts at the OPCW to discredit the work of the Fact Finding Mission's investigators. Russia is determined to protect its Syrian ally, whatever the harm that causes to the ban on chemical weapons use and to the wider international system.

But Russia does not have a veto in the OPCW Executive Council. That's why it resorts to filibustering and unacceptable personal attacks on people of integrity, as happened in the Executive Council last Friday. Bullying is wrong, and it is also – always – a sign of fundamental weakness.

The Executive Council is composed of 41 countries. To take action requires 28 members to clearly say that it is the right thing to do. Abstaining, under these circumstances, has the same effect as saying "no" to further action – and is an abdication of responsibility. Each member state has a duty to decide for itself. And to answer the question – what are we doing here, what are we for, if as an organisation we fail to take action on the basis of the findings of the bodies that we all agreed to support, to end chemical weapons use in Syria?

The UK is committed to uphold the global ban on use of chemical weapons. We urge all States Parties to unite in defence of the Chemical Weapons Convention and hold to account any who use chemical weapons, without fear or favour. This must include not only the Asad regime, but Daesh too. Let us not define the OPCW's 20th Anniversary year as the moment when States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention chose to do nothing. Instead, let us come together to take action to hold those who use chemical weapons to account. Let us send a clarion call that the Convention, and its fundamental tenets, will be upheld by us all.

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