Syria: Gioia Tauro is chemical agents transfer port – Most important disarmament operation in last 10 years, says Bonino

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The chemical agents leaving Syria on Danish and Norwegian ships will be transferred to the US vessel “MV Cape Ray” in the Calabrian port of Gioia Tauro. The official announcement was made during a hearing before the joint Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees attended by Foreign Minister Emma Bonino, the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, Maurizio Lupi, and the Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü. The operation is part of the international initiative on chemical disarmament in Syria.

Chemical agents to be transferred by mid-February

As Ambassador Üzümcü explained, the chemical agents will be transferred in late January–early February, and “in any case, no later than mid-February”. They will then be destroyed over the following two months.

The agents will be trans-loaded from the Danish and Norwegian cargo ships (which will load them at the Syrian port of Latakia) to the Cape Ray. The American ship will then neutralise the toxic cargo. Minister Bonino provided the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees with further details. “To date, only some of the containers of Syrian chemical agents have been loaded onto the Danish ship that will bring them to Italy”, she explained. All of the others have still to arrive in Latakia for loading.

No storage or transit on Italian territory for the Syrian chemical agents, says Bonino

“This is one of the most important disarmament operations in the last 10 years, more important than the one we saw in Libya”, announced Minister Bonino. “In deciding which Italian port to use to transfer the agents, we also consulted the Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, and the Ministries of Home Affairs, Defence and Transport”.

The Foreign Minister then clarified the security measures envisaged for the trans-loading in the Calabrian port. “There will be no storage or transit on land, except for the necessary movements from one dock to another”. Minister Bonino had already illustrated the

arrangements for the operation on 12 December 2013, when she first announced the government's decision to make an Italian port available.

Maurizio Lupi, the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, took over from Minister Bonino to explain the practicalities to the Committees. The transfer would be "from ship to ship, using special tracks and thus avoiding any storage of the containers on land".

OPCW thanks Italy for generous contribution in destruction of Syrian chemical arsenal

Ambassador Üzümcü, the Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), publicly thanked Italy for "its generous contribution in making an Italian port available". He explained that "OPCW inspectors will be on board the Cape Ray, which will destroy the chemical agents in Damascus's arsenal in international waters". And, he assured the joint Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees, the operation in Italy is "a one-off: it will not be repeated".

"Italy", he continued, "has donated 3 million euros to the OPCW Trust Fund for the destruction of the Syrian weapons". It also provided a military aircraft to carry the first of the organisation's inspectors to Syria after the chemical weapons attacks in August 2013.

We don't know if Syria has other chemical weapons but Damascus is no longer able to produce them

As to the presence of other chemical weapons in Syria, Üzümcü admitted that the OPCW "does not know whether any other weapons are hidden" on Syrian territory. "Since 1 November 2013", he assured the Committee, "Syria no longer has the capacity to produce them. We are satisfied with the collaboration from Damascus – they've been constructive and open".

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