Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Office Minister represents the UK at the OPCW´s third Review Conference

2013-04-09

Mr Burt said:

“At the outset, the United Kingdom wishes to align itself with the statement made by the European Union. This has addressed many of the key issues before the Third Review Conference, and so I will confine my remarks to a few items of particular importance to the UK.

Let me also congratulate you upon your election, Mr Chairman, and place on the record too our appreciation for all the hard work by Ambassador Baghli of Algeria in her capacity as Chair of the Open Ended Working Group in preparation for this Conference. I would also like to congratulate His Excellency Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü, the Director General, for his excellent leadership of the OPCW and its Technical Secretariat.

Can the UK also take this opportunity to welcome the statement made yesterday by His Excellency, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. His attendance at this conference recognises the vital importance of the Chemical Weapons Convention at this critical time.

It is most important at intervals in the life of a landmark disarmament treaty to be able to step back from the day-to-day details of its implementation and look at the wider picture. A Review Conference provides just such an opportunity. It is the duty of all of us, as States Parties, to take a strategic, may we dare to say visionary, view on where we want our Convention to be in five years time and on the steps needed to get there.

The Chemical Weapons Convention has the express aim of “excluding completely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons”; its object and purpose is clear from its very title. But we meet at a time when millions of people again live in the immediate fear of the use of chemical weapons. The purpose of the Convention was to prevent that ever happening again.

Our focus must of course remain the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons, and, thanks to the work of the possessor states, there are fewer chemical weapons in existence. As the numbers drop further we need a shift in emphasis in the OPCW’s work to preventing re-emergence of such weapons. We consider

the aim of the Convention is to create a world in which peaceful industrial, pharmaceutical, medical and protective uses can prosper without the shadow of chemical warfare hanging over them. This is the intent of the Convention's comprehensive prohibitions.

It was by design that the negotiators require the Review Conference to consider scientific and technological developments. It was my honour to address the Seventh Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention Review Conference in Geneva in 2011; and one of the main issues I highlighted then was that that Convention needed to keep pace with the rapid advances in science and technology. The same applies here too.

The United Kingdom presented two Working Papers during the Open Ended Working Group's meetings earlier this year setting out our views on the Scientific Advisory Board's Report for this Conference and on the important issue of convergence of chemistry and biology. This Conference must also highlight the need for national and international bodies to develop an awareness of the "dual use" risks from chemistry amongst scientists and engineers. We want chemists and chemical engineers to be innovative and for their work to lead to greater peace and prosperity. But to do that they need to be aware that their materials and research could be used for more malign purposes and that they themselves have a moral and ethical responsibility to prevent unintended consequences. This is where education is key.

The United Kingdom is taking part in the ongoing discussions on the place of incapacitating chemical agents in the Convention, particularly given scientific change and the absence of any definition or common understanding of law enforcement. Outside the Convention experts have exchanged views and expressed opinions. The Royal Society in the UK highlighted the significance of this issue in its February 2012 report on developments in neuroscience. The Director General's Scientific Advisory Board drew attention to the issue in its report to this Conference. Both have set out the scientific position as well as advancing our understanding of the complex issues surrounding this topic. The OPCW should also be willing to address such relevant issues and show leadership.

The definition of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals in the Convention's Article II is clear. All incapacitating toxic chemicals fall within its scope. We see the same understanding reflected in the Guidelines for Schedules for Chemicals. Moreover, the types and quantities of toxic chemicals must always be consistent with the purposes not prohibited under the Convention; these include law enforcement whether domestic or international. These definitions apply to future developments, not only the present. That is our safeguard. We should be grateful to the negotiators for their foresight.

In addition, the UK believes we should work together to establish a norm to discourage the use of chemicals more toxic than Riot Control Agents for law enforcement and consider transparency measures or limitations.

I should also like to take this opportunity today to state unequivocally that the UK neither holds, nor is developing, any incapacitating chemical agents for law enforcement. We encourage all other States Parties to state their positions on this question.

The Convention must remain fit for purpose. It must adapt to an ever changing world and maintain its role as an effective deterrent to the re-emergence of chemical weapons. We therefore support work to promote chemical safety and security, so long as this does not duplicate or undermine efforts in other fora. Contributions by members of world-wide civil society and the chemical industry cannot be ignored in reaching these goals. They have a key role to play. The UK wishes to see an increase in the level of active participation at the OPCW by these important groups. The OPCW should not operate as a closed and inwardly focused body.

I should like to recall a statement made by one of my predecessors in February 1986 during the early stages of the negotiations for this Convention. Tim Renton noted that the Conference on Disarmament was once again meeting in the dark shadow of the use of chemical weapons in the Iraq/Iran conflict. Here we are assembled more than a quarter of a century later to review the operation of a Convention that the delegations in Geneva laboured long and hard to conclude. But sadly, the dark shadow of chemical warfare has still not been lifted, as the continuing conflict in a chemically armed Syria reminds us.

No State Party here today can ignore the situation in Syria. To do so would be contrary to why we here joined the Convention. This Conference has a responsibility to act accordingly and acknowledge the serious modern day threat from Syrian chemical weapons. The United Kingdom therefore strongly supports the assistance being provided by the Director General to the United Nations to investigate use of chemical weapons in Syria. We call once again on the Syrian authorities to ensure the security of their chemical weapons and production facilities. The international community will hold individuals responsible for their actions if such horrific weapons were ever to be used; and moreover, we will seek to bring to account any who are responsible for ordering their use, as well as for using them. We continue to call on Syria to accede to the Convention without delay.

The UK hopes and expects that this Conference will be decisive and set out a clear visionary path for the OPCW for the next five years. We call upon all States Parties to work together to achieve that end.

I request that this statement be issued as an official document of the Third Review Conference.”

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-office-minister-represents-the-uk-at-the-opcw-s-third-review-conference