Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

British Ambassador addresses the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

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Speaking at the 83rd session of the OPCW Executive Council, Sir Geoffrey said:

Madam Chair, Director General,

The UK supports the EU statement delivered by the Permanent Representative of Slovakia yesterday. I wish to address some additional points of particular concern to the UK. I will focus my remarks today on only one issue: that of Syria. It is so serious that it demands this Council's full attention. And I shall stick to the facts.

Madam Chair,

This Executive Council meets in the shadow of the biggest challenge faced by the Chemical Weapons Convention since it entered into force, almost twenty years ago. The primary purpose of the Convention, and this Organisation, is to ensure a world free from chemical weapons. As States Parties, we are "determined to exclude completely the possibility of the use of chemical weapons". Yet, in news reports beamed around the world in the past three years, we have seen footage of the aftermath of the use of chemical weapons on multiple occasions in Syria.

Director General, your Fact Finding Missions in 2014 and 2015 found that chemical weapons had indeed been used on multiple occasions in Syria. The United Nations Security Council acted responsibly, and unanimously, and took action to follow up your reports, and the views of this Executive Council. The Security Council unanimously established an independent expert panel to investigate chemical weapons use further in order to identify the perpetrators. Accountability for such terrible crimes was essential, we all said. Now, after a year of painstaking investigation, the Joint Investigative Mechanism has published its clear findings:

First, "that the Syrian Arab Armed Forces used chemical weapons in Talmenes, Syria, on 21 April 2014";

Second, "that the Syrian Arab Armed Forces used chemical weapons in Sarmin, Syria, on 16 March 2015", and;

Third, "that (so called) ISIL used chemical weapons in Marea, Syria, on 21 August 2015."

If these findings weren't shocking enough, the JIM report could have gone even further. There is consistency and a pattern of behaviour across many of the cases which suggests that the two cases where the JIM found the Syrian authorities were responsible are the tip of a very dangerous iceberg. The JIM will report further in the next few weeks, with final conclusions on three of those additional cases where the authorities are heavily implicated. However, the conclusions published in the August report are so serious that they demand strong international action now.

Director General, in addition to the JIM report's stark findings, in July we received your report to the Executive Council on the Technical Secretariat's work to verify Syria's Declaration of its chemical weapons programme. You concluded that serious gaps,inconsistencies and discrepancies remained in the Syrian Declaration, and that Syria had failed to provide the required transparency and meaningful cooperation with the OPCW.

Since that report, you have shared with us correspondence from the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister that effectively dismissed your requests for more meaningful cooperation, and again queried the clear forensic evidence presented by the Technical Secretariat. Instead, the Syrians prefer to stick to their own pseudo-scientific explanations for the samples found by the DAT. These sample results provide damning evidence that Syria had undeclared chemical weapons research programmes, and confirmed that various chemical weapons agents were present at locations where they should not have been. This lack of cooperation is also part of a pattern. The JIM noted in their report that, despite repeated requests, Syria did not provide the information requested. Where information was given, the JIM has discredited the Syrian narrative. The confirmed use of chemical weapons by Syria and Syria's failure to address serious outstanding questions about their Declaration cannot be seen in isolation: there are clear linkages. Syria has been found by the JIM to have used chemical weapons in the form of chlorine barrel bombs. Syria has not declared chlorine barrel bombs. Both Syria's use of chemical weapons and its failure to provide a full account of its chemical weapons programme amount to serious violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Madam Chair,

Syria's dishonesty and obfuscation in its dealings with both the JIM and with the OPCW leads us to believe that Syria has not only sought to preserve some of its chemical weapon capabilities, but also to develop new delivery systems in order to use chlorine as a chemical weapon. Unless the international community responds robustly, we are likely to see the retention of these capabilities as well as the continued use of toxic chemicals as weapons. Syria's response to both the JIM and to the OPCW shows a clear pattern of behaviour, which demonstrates that the Syrian authorities are not prepared either to take their international obligations seriously, or to abide by international law. The Syrian authorities' actions in using barrel bombs containing chlorine, as clearly stated by the JIM, are a clear breach of UN Security Council resolutions 2118, 2209 and 2235, as well

as Syria’s obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention. They constitute a war crime.

We need also to be clear that so-called ISIL or Daesh has also been found to have used sulphur mustard. This too is a war crime, and serves only to reinforce our commitment to defeat Daesh.

Madam Chair,

We’ve long said that those responsible for using chemical weapons must be held to account, and that everyone responsible for these war crimes must be dealt with accordingly. Unless we act on those words, we risk normalising the use of chemical weapons. Demonstrating this Council’s collective commitment to pursue accountability for such crimes will make others think twice before using chemical weapons. It will reinforce the credibility of the UN, the OPCW, and the wider international system. It is therefore essential that we have a robust international response. We must work together to see justice for the victims of these heinous weapons, and to ensure that the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, stops.

When this Convention entered into force, nearly 20 years ago, we established collectively a norm that chemical weapons use would not be tolerated. We all stood up for our common belief that such weapons had to be consigned to the past. We urge our fellow Executive Council members to stand up again now for the founding principle of the Chemical Weapons Convention. We urge our fellow Executive Council members to express unanimous horror about the finding that a State Party to the Convention has used chemical weapons. We urge our fellow Executive Council members to express horror that a terrorist group has also used chemical weapons. Adoption, by consensus, of the Decision proposed by the United States would send a positive message in dark times that this Council accepts its responsibilities, and that we will respond to such terrible crimes effectively, and with one voice.

Thank you, Madam Chair

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-ambassador-delivers-uk-statement-at-opcw