Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

55th Special Session of OPCW Executive Council

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Thank you Mr Chair,

The United Kingdom supports the statement made by the Ambassador of Estonia on behalf of the European Union. I would like to make a few additional remarks.

The United Kingdom thanks the Director General for the comprehensive and thorough Fact Finding Mission reports on recent investigations into the incident at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April this year and in to an incident at Um Housh in September 2016.

The OPCW's swift response, deploying the FFM to investigate the allegations of chemical weapons use in Khan Shaykhun within 24 hours of the claims being made, was exemplary. Your team worked in the most testing of circumstances. All of us here today should be grateful for the dedication of your staff.

As your report details, what happened in Khan Shaykhun was the worst of human acts. The banned nerve agent sarin was used to kill at least 100 people, including many children, and to injure more than 200. Even samples that the Syrian Government tested and shared confirm that sarin was used. So those facts are not in dispute. The use of chemical weapons is a war crime. There is now a pressing need to find out who was responsible, and to seek justice for the victims. I am grateful for the Director General's swift work to pass the FFM's report to the OPCW/UN Joint Investigative Mechanism so that they can work to identify the perpetrator of this most horrific crime.

We welcome the fact that the JIM is also looking into the FFM's report on an exposure to sulphur mustard in Um Housh in September 2016. Impunity for such crimes is never acceptable. This Council must take a firm stand against all chemical weapons use, and all perpetrators must be brought to justice.

The United Kingdom's assessment is that it is almost certain that the Syrian Government was responsible for a sarin attack on Khan Shaykhun on 4 April. Let me briefly explain why.

There is no evidence to suggest that any party to the conflict in Syria, other than the Syrian Government, has access to a complex nerve agent such as sarin. We note that the FFM's report refers to testimony from witnesses describing the presence of jets in the area at the time of the attack. Only the Syrian Air Force has the capability to launch a chemical weapons

attack from aircraft, and it has already been condemned by this Council for having been found to have used chemical weapons, deployed from aircraft, on at least three occasions in 2014 and 2015.

Meanwhile the Syrian Government's story has changed on multiple occasions since the horrific events of 4 April, twisting a new narrative each time to fit the emerging facts. First there was a blanket denial of any sarin release, then they told a simply extraordinary story of an airstrike on a supposed jihadist chemical weapons storage facility on April 4th, which they said made sarin; now as we know, sarin is a relatively complex agent to develop and manufacture, and there is no credible evidence that anyone in Syria, other than the regime, has the capability to produce and to weaponise it. We all watched the terrible news footage reporting the early morning attacks in real time, but the Syrians have told us tales of an attack at midday instead. And finally, the Syrian Government handed over samples which it had obtained and tested from the impact site, and proved positive for sarin, just like other samples that the FFM had tested. But now the Syrian Government seeks to discredit the FFM's report as, according to the Syrian Foreign Ministry's statement on 1 July, "the creation of a sick mind".

Mr Chair,

As we all know, the FFM is a professional, independent and impartial body, it has unparalleled technical expertise and works to a consistent and sound methodology. It is our duty to value and to protect the integrity and impartiality of the OPCW - anything less is frankly disrespectful to the ideals we all say we share. In that context I am glad to announce that the United Kingdom will provide further funds to support the OPCW's vital work through the Trust Fund for Syria Missions.

The Technical Secretariat has worked tirelessly over the past four years to shine the light of truth on Syria's chemical weapons programme. Since Syria joined the Convention, in the aftermath of the Ghouta atrocity in 2013, the Syrian Government has denied scientific reality and has covered up the full extent of its chemical weapons programme. Syria and its backers claim that it has destroyed its chemical weapon stockpiles. Yet the Director General has continued to report that the OPCW cannot declare Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme as "accurate and complete", and that serious "gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies remain". While the Director General and the Technical Secretariat have worked tirelessly to establish the truth, Syria has failed to reciprocate. The Syrian government has provided limited information, only under pressure; and when challenged with evidence that made its previous position untenable. Syrian engagement with the OPCW has been neither meaningful nor honest. Their supposed cooperation is a facade. The JIM's finding in 2016 of repeated Regime use of chemical weapons underscores the fact that Syria has unquestionably failed to account for, or to destroy, its whole chemical weapons programme.

Mr Chair,

This Executive Council cannot turn a blind eye to such flagrant violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention. When the perpetrators of the atrocity in Khan Shaykhun are identified, we must act to send a clear message that chemical weapons use will not be tolerated, and that we are prepared to stand up to the values we all said that we held in common and which we enshrined in that Convention twenty years ago.

Finally, may I confirm that the United Kingdom will be pleased to support the Joint Declaration to be proposed today by France and Germany on this matter.

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