

UK statement to the OPCW on the use of chemical weapons in Douma, Syria

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Thank you Mr Chair,

I am grateful to the Director General for his update on the OPCW's investigation into the horrific chemical weapons attack on 7 April in Douma, Syria. The Technical Secretariat has once again demonstrated the dedication and professionalism of its staff, willing to deploy promptly to Douma in dangerous circumstances. They have our full support and we look forward to their report. It is imperative that the Syrian Arab Republic and the Russian Federation offer the OPCW Fact Finding Mission team their full cooperation and assistance to carry out their difficult task.

This Council has had to come together, yet again, to discuss another shocking violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention in Syria.

Up to 75 people, including children, were killed in a despicable and barbaric attack in Douma on 7 April. The World Health Organisation has reported that 500 patients, seen by its partners in Syria, had symptoms consistent with chemical weapons exposure.

The world has seen the harrowing images of men, women and children lying dead with foam in their mouths. These were innocent families who, at the time the chemical weapon was unleashed, were seeking shelter underground in basements. First-hand accounts from NGOs and aid workers have detailed burns to the eyes, suffocation and skin discolouration, with a chlorine-like odour surrounding the victims.

As my Prime Minister said on 14 April, we are clear about who is responsible for the atrocity. A significant body of information, including intelligence, indicates the Syrian Regime is responsible for this latest attack. Open source accounts allege a barrel bomb was used to deliver the chemicals, and a regime helicopter was seen above Douma on the evening of 7 April. The Opposition does not operate helicopters or use barrel bombs. Reliable intelligence indicates that Syrian military officials coordinated what appears to be the use of chlorine in Douma on 7 April. No other group could have carried out this attack.

As this Executive Council knows well, the Syrian Regime has an abhorrent record of using chemical weapons against its own people. Chemical weapons use has become an all too regular weapon of war in the Syrian conflict. The evidence is well known to this Council:

- The OPCW has recorded more than 390 allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria since the Fact Finding Mission was established in 2014
- The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism has found Syria responsible for using chemical weapons on four occasions between 2014-2017, including chlorine and sarin
- Syria has not provided the OPCW with a complete account of its chemical weapons programme. The Director General reported just last month that Syria had not provided credible evidence to account for 22 serious issues. This includes quantities of agent Syria possessed, the type of agent and the munitions used for delivery

Based on the persistent pattern of behaviour, and the cumulative analysis of specific incidents, we assess it as highly likely that the Syrian regime has continued to use chemical weapons since the attack on Khan Sheikhoun a year ago. If unchecked, all of the evidence suggests that it would continue to do so.

We and international partners have sought time and again to prevent the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against the Syrian people. Time and again when we have seen chemical weapons used in Syria, Russia has vetoed resolutions at the UN Security Council. Russia has vetoed six chemical weapons-related resolutions since the start of 2017, including a veto just last week of a draft resolution that would have established an independent investigation into the attack on Douma.

Russia has argued that the attack on Douma was somehow staged, or faked. They have even suggested that the UK was behind the attack. That is ludicrous. The attack on Douma was not reported by just a sole source in opposition to the Regime. There are multiple eye witness accounts, substantial video footage, accounts from first responders and medical evidence.

This Council heard similar false claims from Russia and from Syria last year. They questioned the credibility of the evidence of a chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun. Then they had to change their story once Syria itself had passed samples to the OPCW which Syria had already tested, and which proved that sarin had been used. Since 2016, Russia has sought to undermine every OPCW investigation into allegations of Regime chemical weapons use. Yet again, Russia is spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation designed to undermine the integrity of the OPCW's fact finding mission. Russia closed down the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism when it found that Syria was responsible for chemical weapons attacks. Russia has sought to block all action in this Council and at the Security Council to hold the Syrian Regime accountable for its actions. Russia's activity have made further UN sponsored action untenable.

The UK, along with the US and France, were clear that that chemical weapons use could not continue to go unchallenged. Syria's use of chemical weapons, which has exacerbated the human suffering in Syria, is a serious crime of international concern. It is a breach of the customary international law prohibition on the use of chemical weapons and amounts to a war crime and a crime against humanity. The military strikes we carried out on Friday night were specifically designed to degrade the Syrian Regime's chemical weapons capability and deter their use.

The legal basis of humanitarian intervention was clear. This requires three conditions to be met:

First, that there is convincing evidence of extreme humanitarian distress on a large scale requiring immediate and urgent relief.

Second, it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved.

And third, the proposed use of force must be necessary and proportionate to the aim of relief of humanitarian suffering. It must be strictly limited in time and scope to this aim.

The objective of our military action was specifically the prevention of further use of chemical weapons in order to alleviate humanitarian suffering.

It was not about interfering in a civil war. And it was not about regime change.

Allies identified a specific and limited set of targets. They were:

- a chemical weapons storage and production facility
- a key chemical weapons research centre and
- a military bunker involved in chemical weapons attacks

Hitting these targets will significantly degrade the Syrian Regime's ability to research, develop and deploy chemical weapons.

We have sought to use diplomatic channels over the past five years to stop chemical weapons use in Syria but our efforts have been repeatedly thwarted.

The lack of accountability for the Khan Sheikhoun sarin attack can only have reassured the Syrian Regime that the international community was not serious in its stated commitment to uphold the norm against chemical weapons use, and to hold perpetrators to account. This is shameful.

The choice for members of this Executive Council, and for all States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, is clear. Will we act to defend the Chemical Weapons Convention when its norms are so flagrantly violated by a Syrian Government using chemical weapons against its own people, over and over again? Syria and its handful of allies continue to obfuscate, filibuster, and lie. The time has come for all members of this Executive Council to take a stand. Too many duck the responsibility that comes with being a member of this Council. Failure to act to hold perpetrators to account will only risk further barbaric use of chemical weapons, in Syria and beyond.

Thank you Mr Chair.

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