Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Statement to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on the Salisbury attack: 4 April 2018

2018-04-04

Thank you Mr Chair. The UK supports the statement made by Bulgaria on behalf of the European Union. This Council has been

summoned by Russia

today, on an anniversary that marks a sombre moment in the history of chemical disarmament.

This meeting, about the United Kingdom, has been called today by the Russian Federation at very short notice. We were unsighted as to Russia's intentions behind today's session. They have not sought to discuss this at all with us in advance. They have not sought to engage us on the agenda or the timing. Indeed our Permanent Representative is unable to attend today as he is overseas.

Perhaps Russia have pressed ahead with the meeting today to make a rather political point. Exactly 1 year ago, between the hours of 6:30 and 7am, more than 100 people were killed and hundreds more injured in a horrific nerve agent attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Syria. It should be deeply upsetting to all of us here to know that not only are chemical weapons attacks in Syria continuing but, exactly 1 month ago today, nerve agent was also used here in Europe.

There are unfortunate parallels between the way Russia treated the

OPCW

and international mechanisms in the wake of chemical weapons use in Syria and the approach it is taking to the

OPCW

today. In 2016, the Joint Investigative Mechanism, a body unanimously set up by the UN Security Council, found that Syria had conducted 3 chlorine attacks and Daesh an attack using sulphur mustard. In response, Russia used its veto to prevent the UN Security Council from taking action. The

OPCW

was able to pass a Decision, but this was in spite of fierce Russian opposition. At the end of 2016, the

JIM

was renewed unanimously. Yet Russia then sought to close the

JIM

down after its thorough, scientific investigation found that Syria was responsible for the horrific Khan Sheikhoun attack. The Security Council has not been able to respond to those findings because of Russian obstruction. And then Russia closed the

JIM

down.

It seems clear that Russia will never accept the legitimacy of any investigation into chemical weapons use unless it comes up with an answer Russia likes. Why else would Russia have refused to renew the

JIM

’s mandate? Why else would Russia not bother to wait a week or 2 until the

OPCW

had completed its technical assistance to the UK and produced its report before calling this meeting?

During the last session of the

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Executive Council, our Permanent Representative promised to

update this Council on the progress of our investigation

into the reckless use of a military grade nerve agent. He made 2 statements at that session, and circulated our Prime Minister’s letter to the

OPCW

Director General. On 16 March we circulated Ambassador Wilson’s letter to the Director General, in which he requested

OPCW

technical assistance under

Article VIII (38) (e)

. We have followed the model of technical assistance that other states parties who have been subject to chemical weapons attacks have followed, including Iraq in 2016 and 2017. The

OPCW

’s work is still underway, and, as previously promised, the UK looks forward to sharing its findings with this Council once we have received the report from the Technical Secretariat.

What happened in Salisbury on 4 March was a reckless and indiscriminate act, which threatened the lives of innocent civilians. More than 130 people were affected by the attack. More than 50 people, including first responders and 3 children, reported to hospital.

To recap our work to date, on 12 March, once it became clear that a chemical weapons attack had taken place, our Foreign Secretary summoned the Russian Ambassador in London and sought an explanation from the Russian government. We asked Russia 2 clear questions: how did a Russian developed military grade nerve agent come to be used on the streets of Salisbury? And had Russia lost control of its stocks? We also asked Russia to provide full disclosure of its programme to the

OPCW

. In light of the extraordinary, urgent and grave nature of the attack, we

requested an explanation within 24 hours

. We were entitled to make such an urgent request following a chemical weapons attack on UK soil, which left individuals gravely ill in hospital.

Russia failed to respond to any of those questions, and instead has generated more than 24 contradictory and changing counter-narratives. They have suggested that Sweden or the US might have carried out the attack, or, according to Foreign Minister Lavrov on 2 April, the UK attacked its own people to “distract from Brexit”. These are shameless, preposterous statements. The UK – supported by many other countries – has

assessed that it is highly likely that the Russian State is responsible

for this attack, and that there is no plausible alternative explanation. This is based on our identification of the nerve agent used, our knowledge that Russia has produced this agent and remains capable of doing so, Russia’s record of conducting state sponsored

assassinations, and our assessment that Russia views defectors as suitable targets for assassination.

On Monday 19 March,

following our request for technical assistance

under Article VIII 38 (e) of the Convention, experts from the Technical Secretariat met with officials from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) and the police to discuss the process for collecting samples for verification. The Technical Secretariat team was able to obtain environmental and biomedical samples for onward despatch to

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designated labs.

We hope that a briefing from the Technical Secretariat on their activities will be possible once they have completed their work and finalised their report. The UK will share the findings with this Council.

In the meantime, over 3 weeks after the UK's 12 March request to Russia, and with 2 people remaining under constant care in hospital, Russia has still provided no substantive response. On the contrary, Russia has treated the offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance. Its insistence on an Executive Council meeting today, before the

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has completed its bilateral technical assistance to the UK under Article VIII (38) is yet another cynical move, showing a lack of respect for the

CWC

, the

OPCW

and the Technical Secretariat. That they called this meeting on the

anniversary of Khan Sheikhoun

shows contempt for those victims too.

Indeed, a senior Russian official said at a meeting in Moscow recently that "Within the framework of The Chemical Weapons Convention and the

OPCW

, there is no capability for providing assessments of what happened in Salisbury.”

And yesterday, the Russian embassy in the UK tweeted “Russia will accept results of the

OPCW

Salisbury poisoning investigation only if Russian experts participate in it.”

We requested assistance from the Technical Secretariat in accordance with the Convention; accordingly, analysis of samples is being carried out by independent, impartial experts, through the Designated Laboratory system, which all States Parties support, in accordance with the Convention. The work of the Technical Secretariat must remain impartial. Russia’s refusal to accept the results of the

OPCW

’s investigation unless Russian experts participate in it suggests that Russia is opposed to the independence and impartiality of the Technical Secretariat and is nervous about what the results will show.

Russia’s statements demonstrate a wilful ignorance of the Convention’s provisions and, worse than that, a disdain for the independence and competence of the Technical Secretariat.

We will not agree to Russia’s demand to conduct a joint investigation into the attack in Salisbury because the UK – supported by many other countries – has assessed that it is highly likely that the Russian State is responsible for this attack, and that there is no plausible alternative explanation. There is no requirement in the Chemical Weapons Convention, for a victim to engage the likely perpetrator in a joint investigation. To do so would be perverse.

In line with the Convention, the UK has led our own response, engaging the

OPCW

as appropriate. We are conducting an urgent investigation to assist the victims and ensure accountability for the use of chemical weapons on UK soil, including potential criminal accountability under the

UK Chemical Weapons Act 1996

. There is a painstaking, independent, ongoing police investigation to identify the specific individuals responsible for the crime. What we want to happen now is clear.

First and foremost, this must never happen again. There is no place for chemical weapons in the 21st century. Not in Syria, not in Iraq, not in Malaysia and not in the UK.

We are deeply concerned by the continuing attempts to erode the norm against chemical weapons use. It is incumbent on every party to the Convention, and every member of this Executive Council to uphold the international rules against the use of chemical weapons and to ensure that those responsible for their use are held to account. Regrettably, Russian behaviour to date suggests that one member of this Council does not share these objectives.

Finally, we call on Russia to meet its obligations under this Convention, to end its offensive weapons programme, and to declare its programme of Novichoks so that the world never again sees use of this horrific nerve agent. Mr Chairman, we would like to request that this statement is issued as an official document of this meeting of the Executive Council and placed on the

OPCW

site.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Find out more about the

UK government response to the Salisbury attack

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Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-organisation-for-the-prohibition-of-chemical-weapons-on-the-salisbury-attack-4-april-2018