Speech by Niels Annen, Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, at the Special Session of the Conference of States Parties of the Chemical Weapons Convention, The Hague

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-- Translation of advanced text --

Mr Chairman,

Mr Director-General,

Ministers,

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The global ban on chemical weapons use is under attack. Over the last years, this taboo has been broken time and again. The international community cannot stand idly by. It is our responsibility as States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention to react. It is our responsibility to ensure that adequate measures are in place to identify those responsible.

Without identification, perpetrators will continue to challenge us.

Without identification, those responsible will never be prosecuted.

Without identification, they will remain undeterred.

It is high time to put an end to such a situation. It is high time to send a strong political signal to all those who continue to threaten our security. We owe it to the victims; we owe it to our shared goals and objectives as enshrined in the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The banning of these horrendous weapons, codified in the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), is one of the great civilizational achievements of our time. The CWC is at the very

centre of the international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architecture. It is, indeed, a tremendous success story. It made it possible to take the important steps towards the destruction of the vast majority of all declared chemical weapons. And it codified the norms prohibiting the development, transfer, possession, and, most importantly, the use of these weapons – in fact establishing a chemical weapons taboo.

This achievement is under grave threat. We are witnessing a serious recurrence of chemical weapons use. And we are failing to identify and to hold accountable those responsible.

Recurrence of chemical weapons use

This year marks the seventh year of chemical weapons use in Syria. In the last couple of weeks alone, the

OPCW

and the Human Rights Council confirmed in three separate Fact Finding Mission and Commission of Inquiry Reports that chlorine and sarin had been used in chemical weapons attacks - among them the despicable attack of April 7 on Douma, which caused the death of dozens and injured hundreds more.

The Douma attack took place exactly one year after the Syrian regime used the nerve agent sarin in a horrific attack on Khan Shaykhun that killed a hundred men, women and children.

The repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime is not all we have to face. Over the course of the past year and a half, such weapons have been employed in three other countries. The so called Islamic State employed mustard gas in Syria and Iraq. A nerve agent was used in an attack at the airport in Kuala Lumpur. And recently we were shocked and appalled by the reckless use of another nerve agent in a public space in Salisbury, Great Britain – right in the centre of Europe.

These massive breaches on their own threaten to undermine the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons.

Impunity

Equally damaging, however, is the fact that the perpetrators of such heinous acts enjoy impunity. They enjoy impunity because there is no longer any independent and impartial mechanism for attribution. As a consequence, the perpetrators cannot be identified and ultimately held accountable.

In 2016 and 2017, the

OPCW

/United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), mandated by the

UN

Security Council, performed the crucial task of identifying the perpetrators. We commend its professional and successful work which resulted in seven reports, attributing the use of chlorine gas and sarin to the Syrian regime – and the use of mustard gas to the so-called Islamic State.

We deeply regret that the mandate of the JIM was not renewed in November 2017. Since then, the

UN

Security Council has not managed to establish any new attribution mechanism.

The JIM was only able to investigate the tip of the iceberg. But what about the other chemical weapons attacks confirmed by the FFM? How do we ensure justice for their victims? Those responsible for such horrific acts must be identified and held to account. No use of chemical weapons can ever be justified, be it in Syria, be it in the centre of Europe, or anywhere.

Reinforcing the norm, strengthening the CWC

We cannot and will not accept the continuous erosion of the chemical weapons taboo. We are already witnessing with great concern multiple attempts to weaken the international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architecture. The CWC as a core pillar of this architecture must be protected, the rules-based multilateral international order respected.

That is why this special session of the Conference of States Parties is so important. We – the States Parties – have to live up to our responsibilities and reaffirm the principles of the Convention. We must unequivocally condemn the use of chemical weapons, anywhere and by anyone. We need to enhance the capability and capacity of the

OPCW

, including its possible assistance to States Parties in fulfilling their obligations under the Convention and enabling them to contribute to the global efforts towards eradicating chemical weapons.

And, first and foremost, we need to enable the Technical Secretariat to identify the perpetrators of those chemical weapons attacks confirmed by the FFM. There is nothing in the Convention that prevents the Secretariat from fulfilling this task. The policy-making bodies of this organisation would then have to draw appropriate conclusions from the findings.

Let me be very clear: We are not proposing that the

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hold those identified accountable. Ensuring accountability would be a role for other institutions. What we are calling for is a solution that would enable the Secretariat to perform the technical work of independently and impartially investigating and identifying those responsible – and reporting on its investigations to the Executive Council, the Conference of States Parties and the

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Security Council for their consideration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We firmly believe that the proposed draft decision tabled by the United Kingdom, co-sponsored by Germany and many others, includes the measures needed to reinforce the Convention and uphold its credibility at this critical time. We appeal to all States Parties to support and adopt this decision.

Let me close by commending your Excellency, Director-General Üzümcü, for your leadership, your foresight and your dedication. In these troubling times, you and your able staff at the

OPCW

have done an extraordinary job.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have witnessed the horror and suffering that chemical weapons inflict upon men, women and children far too many times. We cannot and we must not let these blatant violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention, of international humanitarian law, and of human decency continue.

I thank you.

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