

Supporting the OPCW in its work to investigate chemical weapons use

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Thank you, Mr President.

I would like to start by thanking Under-Secretary-General Nakamitsu, and Director-General Arias for their briefings to the Council today. The Director-General's attendance alongside Ms Nakamitsu underlines the cooperation between the OPCW and the UN on this issue affecting international peace and security.

I thank Director-General Arias for his 86th monthly report and for his update today on the work of the OPCW. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the OPCW Technical Secretariat has spared no effort in attempting to take forward its mandated activities. We are grateful for the professionalism and dedication of the OPCW and its personnel.

We take particular note of updates on the work of the Declaration Assessment Team (DAT). The Director General's report raises two important points:

First, we note that the Declaration Assessment Team and Syria were able to close three outstanding issues related to Syria's initial declaration. This shows that contrary to the assertions of some - that the outstanding issues are artificial - they are, in fact, real and eminently capable of resolution.

Second, the report highlights evidence collected by the Declaration Assessment Team since 2014 that indicates the production and/or weaponisation of chemical warfare nerve agents at a production facility that the Syrian regime declared never to have been used for such production. This underlines the serious nature of, and the importance of, resolving the remaining 19 issues.

In addition, the unresolved issues in Syria's declaration include thousands of munitions and hundreds of tonnes of chemical agents, which Syria has not accounted for. Until all the issues are resolved, the complete elimination of Syria's chemical weapons program, as required under resolution 2118 and the Chemical Weapons Convention, cannot be verified. Given that the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) and the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), have established that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on at least seven occasions since 2013, it is undebatable that the situation represents an ongoing threat to international peace and security.

In light of this, we welcome the resolve shown by the OPCW Executive Council in adopting its decision of 9th of July 2020 in response to the findings of the IIT on the 2017 chemical weapons attacks in Ltamenah carried out by the Syrian Arab Air Force.

In that decision, the Executive Council was explicit that Syria had to declare the chemical weapons and facilities in its possession, acknowledge its chemical weapons activity, and resolve the outstanding issues with its initial declaration. As Director-General Arias has once again confirmed today, Syria failed to comply with the decision, and this will now be addressed during the next session of the Conference of States Parties in April 2021.

Just as the OPCW Executive Council and Conference of States Parties have a role in upholding compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention and its own decisions, so the Security Council has a clear and distinct obligation to address Syria's repeated breaches of resolution 2118.

These breaches include the use of chemical weapons as identified by both the OPCW-UN JIM and the IIT; the retention and/or production of chemical weapons to carry out those attacks and the failure to comply fully with the OPCW, including on its initial declaration and access for the Investigation and Identification Team.

We were unequivocal on the action this Council would take in response to non-compliance with resolution 2118. Not to do so would be a dereliction of this Council's duty.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the UK's trust and confidence in the OPCW, its work and its dedicated staff. We have full confidence in the expertise of the OPCW Technical Secretariat and the robust methodologies of its Fact-Finding Mission investigating allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria. It is not surprising that individuals working in the Technical Secretariat hold a range of views, and a robust assessment process should involve debate and challenge. However, as the Director-General has confirmed, the Technical Secretariat took all views, evidence and theories into account in reaching its considered overall judgement regarding the attack in Douma. The OPCW Technical Secretariat and its multinational personnel showed great professionalism and resilience under intense external pressure and scrutiny. This has included, as we've heard, cyber-attacks - for example, the foiled Russian GRU cyber-attack attempt in The Hague in 2018 - and a sustained disinformation campaign designed to undermine its credibility.

Attempts to undermine the OPCW and its staff have intensified since the use of nerve agents attack in Salisbury and Amesbury in 2013; since the OPCW Conference of State Parties voted to give the Technical Secretariat the role of attributing responsibility for chemical weapons attack in Syria in 2018; and since the poisoning of Russian opposition politician, Alexey Navalny, with a nerve agent from the Novichok group this year.

Only a year ago this Council adopted a Presidential Statement which unanimously reaffirmed our strong support for the work of the OPCW. Just two weeks ago, the overwhelming majority of State Parties, from across all regional groups, voted in favor of the OPCW's budget, which included renewed funding for the IIT and other Technical Secretariat teams working on Syria.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, the UK is well aware of the responsibility conferred on us by the members of the United Nations for the maintenance of international peace and security. We will continue to act on behalf of the vast majority of Member States who believe in the necessity to protect the long-held norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons and to hold those who violate it to account.

Mr President, I do have questions for the Director-General, which I will indicate now, but he may prefer, as is customary, to answer them in closed session.

Some have argued that Syria verifiably destroyed all of its chemical weapons in 2014 and the OPCW has not been able to find any evidence to the contrary since then. How would you answer this?

Our second question: in some respects, Syria appears to be engaging in process with the OPCW, and yet verification of its declaration has been outstanding for 7 years. How can Syria improve its engagement and how does the Director-General assess the prospects of achieving a complete and accurate declaration of its program by the SAR? What is needed in order to achieve this?

And our third question, does the Director-General know of any other case where it has been necessary for the Technical Secretariat, to engage continually with a state party over several years in order to arrive at a declaration that is considered accurate and complete

in accordance with the CWC?

Thank you, Mr President.

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