

Remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the OPCW, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin, at the 87th Session of the OPCW Executive Council, The Hague, March 14, 2018

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Mr Chairman,

This year is special for our organisation – we are completing the fifth cycle of the Convention on the Prohibition and Elimination of Chemical Weapons (CWC) and are looking forward to the review conference. This is a time when we can start summing up some results.

Naturally, the OPCW has reasons to be proud of itself. Last year, the Russian Federation completed the destruction of one of the world's largest chemical arsenals – three years ahead of time. We hope this significant fact will be duly reflected in the documents of the Fourth Review Conference.

The completion of the elimination of chemical stockpiles removed from Libya with the active participation of the international community is an event of equal importance. We also welcome the completion of the chemical demilitarisation programme in Iraq, which was announced, and a relevant report was submitted the other day.

In total, all these successes represent a tangible contribution of the OPCW to the consolidation of international peace and security and major steps on the way to the common noble goal – the elimination of a whole class of weapons of mass destruction.

Today, there is only one participating state that has declared stockpiles of chemical weapons. We would like to call on it to consider possibilities for destroying its stockpiles and, following our example, to do so before the deadline in strict conformity with the CWC. We believe this is a fairly feasible task considering that our partners possess all the necessary financial, material, human and technological resources.

Mr Chairman,

The OPCW working groups on future priorities and preparations for the CWC Review Conference are making a significant contribution to the current review process. We highly appreciate their activities and are grateful to their leaders – ambassadors Vusi Koloane, Sabine Nolke and Gusti Puja. We had interesting discussions and we heard many different views on the future of the OPCW and its priority activities. Some of these ideas are dubious. Some of them go beyond the convention. Nonetheless, we believe that by yearend we will develop common approaches that will receive support based on consensus.

Mr Chairman,

In recent years, the so-called Syrian dossier on chemical weapons has remained at the top of the OPCW agenda. The destruction of chemical weapons removed from the country was completed in 2016, becoming an important milestone. For reference, we would like to say that past supplies from companies in France, Germany, the Netherlands and some other countries from among those who now loudly voice their concern over Syria's former military chemical weapons programme were used to create Syria's stocks of chemical weapons.

We welcome efforts by the Technical Secretariat and Syria to eliminate Syria's two remaining chemical weapons production facilities, which were inaccessible earlier.

We believe that further efforts to this effect in Syria should be purely technical, pragmatic and depoliticised.

We believe that close cooperation between the OPCW Mission to verify Syria's initial declaration under Article III of the CWC and the Syrian authorities will secure real progress in verifying Syria's initial declaration. These activities should be carried out on a regular and continuous basis and target specific results. All parties to this process, including the Executive Council, must finally demonstrate political will and start taking topics that do not need further discussion off the mission's agenda.

We took note of information from the Technical Secretariat regarding the two previous inspections of the Syrian Research and Development Centre in Barzeh and Jamrai, which showed that the centre was not carrying out any activities prohibited under the CWC. It begs the question, how many more inspections of the centre have to be carried out to finally stop raising the issue of the need for monitoring?

Mr Chairman,

We all are certainly moving towards the noble goal of banishing chemical weapons from the life of human society. But, regrettably, the path to it is full of thorns. Our convention is not universal and much has yet to be done for it to acquire this status. At the same time, we see relapses into the use of chemical weapons in "hot spots" happening with alarming frequency. We see evidence of this in Syria, where chemical agents are actively employed by terrorist groups, who often do so with provocative goals in mind in order to point a finger at Damascus for using chemical weapons.

We – like everyone in this room – are highly concerned over the recent reports about chlorine being used in Eastern Ghouta and in Idlib Province. This information comes from terrorist groups and their affiliated NGOs like the White Helmets, which operate in the country. These plants are willingly echoed in capitals of certain states, where top-level officials pelt Syria with accusations, alleging that the information on the use of chlorine is supposedly reliable. At the same time, none of the recent cases of the alleged use of chlorine was investigated and documented by independent international organisations, primarily the OPCW.

But after making high-sounding statements about the Syrian authorities' culpability, some of our partners in certain capitals start refuting their own claims, stating that there is no real evidence on this count. We would like to remind you about the recent quite eloquent admissions made by the Pentagon chief James Mattis, who, according to the February 8, 2018 edition of Newsweek, said that the Defence Department had no proof that the Syrian government had used sarin.

What we hear from Paris is also indicative. President Emmanuel Macron has drawn the "red lines," promising to order an attack on the "Syrian regime" the instant he is given evidence that the Syrian authorities did use chemical weapons. But as he said later, France still has no documented facts that would corroborate the use of prohibited chemical weapons against civilians in Syria.

After all these high-level statements to the contrary, why do we hear repeated charges, including in this room, that the Syrian authorities use chemical weapons? Some capitals went as far as saying that they contemplate a "retaliatory" strike on Syria to punish it for chemical attacks. We estimate these threats as calls for an aggression against a sovereign state in violation of all norms of international law. We think this absolutely unacceptable.

We must ensure that the Technical Secretariat works closely, within its mandate, on clarifying the situation in connection with all cases of presumed use of chemical weapons and cases of finding the toxic chemicals in Syria. For this, all OPCW missions created to carry out investigations or help Syria should do the job thoroughly and competently. Importantly, the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria should strictly conform to the high standards of the CWC and provide verified and doubtless investigation results that make it possible to recreate the real picture of what has happened.

It is a matter of grave concern that certain states, instead of assisting the OPCW in its efforts, are creating some separate organisations, allegedly intended to prevent those guilty of using chemical weapons from getting away with it unpunished. Specifically, in January, Paris hosted a meeting meant to launch so-called International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons. We regard this as nothing else than an attempt to form a narrow circle of states that are bracing up to implement their geopolitical interests in circumvention of the universal international institutions, such as the OPCW and the UN Security Council. It is clear that this initiative is targeted at the Syrian government, which some people call a "regime." Different explanations are not misleading us. We view this initiative as a highly harmful trick. It is also worrying that they clearly intend to somehow relate the OPCW Technical Secretariat to the "partnership." This means undermining the mainstays of our Organisation and involving it in unseemly political games. It is only in this way that we estimate the intention to hold yet another presentation of the "partnership" on the sidelines of the current session.

Mr Chairperson,

Instead of maliciously accusing Syria, as well as Russia, of alleged violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), Washington and London, which have claimed the role of prosecutors, should think about their own compliance with their commitments under this international document.

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Between 2003 and 2011, the United States and Britain found over 4,500 chemical artillery shells and missiles and aviation bombs in Iraq, which were stored there during the rule of Saddam Hussein. They covertly destroyed these chemical warfare systems without the verification of the OPCW's Technical Secretariat in violation of Clause 1(a) of Article III of the CWC. The main reason for keeping these operations secret was Washington's unwillingness to make public its past contribution to Iraq's chemical weapons programme. In particular, markings on the 155mm shells for conventional artillery guns indicated that they were manufactured in the US or in other Western countries under US licences.

The United States only forwarded an official report regarding these operations to the OPCW in 2009 in a bid to convince the OPCW's Executive Council that the measures they took were in strict compliance with the spirit of the Convention. The Technical Secretariat only acknowledged this report in light of the emergency nature of the situation and the absence of a CWC provision regarding the procedure for destroying chemical agents in wartime conditions.

Therefore, the United States and Britain flagrantly violated the CWC provisions without any criticism on the part of the international community. There is no precise information regarding the total number of chemical weapons the United States has found and destroyed on site or has removed from the country.

Back in early 2017, we asked the Technical Secretariat for additional explanations regarding this matter. They recommended that we request them at the bilateral level from our American colleagues. We duly asked our American partners for this information. However, they have not done anything in this connection. This is how half-heartedly they go about their work. At the same time, they demand that others honour their commitments meticulously and without delay.

Here is one more relevant example. Under Clause 1(b) of Article III of the CWC, the United States is obliged to notify the Technical Secretariat of abandoning chemical weapons on the territory of other states. Washington did not do so after ratifying the Convention and is now trying to prevent the publication of this information by other countries, fearing that this would result in accusations of CWC violations.

In particular, the US has not acknowledged ownership of seven aviation bombs and one air spray tank with phosgene and cyanogen chloride, which the Pentagon left behind in Panama, on the island of San Jose in the Las Perlas Archipelago, despite the fact that experts from the OPCW's Technical Secretariat confirmed beyond any doubt the US origin of these weapons back in 2002.

Washington, acting with assistance of the Technical Secretariat's Office of the Legal Adviser, ensured that the leadership of Panama agreed to identify the eight munitions as "Old Chemical Weapons" and pledged to destroy them. Following that, the government of Panama revised its original CWC declaration to reflect the presence of chemical weapons on its territory, thereby assuming responsibility for their origin and destruction.

In all, the United States left in Panama several thousand units of toxic chemicals and the achieved agreement makes it possible to ensure their elimination with minimal damage to the US reputation. In addition, it is necessary to remember that apart from the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada are also directly involved with the chemical weapons left in Panama.

And, finally, a considerable amount of chemical weapons left by the US after the Vietnam War were also discovered in Cambodia. In particular, 58 US chemical munitions with CN and CS, and 12 air spray tanks with containers for poisonous chemicals were found in Mondulkiri Province in 2012. A special commission of the OPCW determined that they belong to the United States.

In 2017, 34 dump sites of chemical weapons were discovered in Svay Rieng Province: US Air Force bombs equipped with the CS irritant, drop cassettes and barrel bombs with remote detonators. Tellingly, the Americans refused to discuss with Cambodians the negative impact of toxic chemicals on the local population, flora and fauna and are ignoring their requests to help them dispose of these chemicals.

Mr Chairperson,

We welcome the activities of the Working Group on Terrorism and its subgroup on non-government structures. We are convinced in the need for the OPCW's specific anti-terrorist work. That said, we would like to emphasise that our organisation is not anti-terrorist in character and its capabilities in that area are considerably limited.

However, the OPCW can still make a serious contribution to international anti-terrorist efforts. We believe that there is serious unused potential for expanding the work of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), whose mandate is to investigate terrorist activities linked with the use of toxic chemicals. After all, it is an indisputable fact that terrorist organisations – that are operating not only in Syria – possess technology for producing chemical arms and have the required industrial capacities. They are actively using their deadly products to achieve their horrible aims. Incidentally, the chlorine recently found by the Syrian army on territories freed from terrorists confirms that the militants have reserves of toxic chemicals.

Esteemed Mr Chairperson,

Naturally, what I have said does not cover the entire range of activities of our organisation. Our delegation will express its opinion on other urgent issues as they are put on the agenda of the current session of the Executive Council.

Thank you for your attention.

We would like to ask you to disseminate this speech as an official document of the 87th session of the OPCW Executive Council and publish it on the OPCW's external server.