
Thank you, Mr President,

I would like to begin by thanking the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ms Izumi Nakamitsu, and Director-General Arias for their briefings.

Mr President,

Today, the Council is addressing, in principle for the last time during my country's mandate, the subject of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. This is an opportune time to analyse the evolution of this issue over the past two years.

First of all, all the Member States of this Council have repeated many times that chemical weapons should never be used under any circumstances. The Chemical Weapons Convention reflects our collective aversion to the use of such weapons. The full and unconditional implementation of this treaty is the only way to ensure a world free of chemical weapons. The Convention is not only a legal instrument, but also a moral declaration on the dignity of humanity.

Since Syria's accession to the Convention in 2013, the OPCW has systematically strengthened its commitment towards this country. This has been done in full transparency and consultation with the Syrian Arab Republic, including through the establishment of the fact-finding mission in 2014. The Declaration Assessment Team was established in the same year to assist Syria in resolving the gaps and inconsistencies identified in its initial declaration. Numerous meetings have taken place between the OPCW and the Syrian authorities.

- ⇒ Unfortunately, during the period that Belgium has been a member of this Council, there has been no substantial progress in resolving the gaps and inconsistencies in Syria's declaration. The fact that Syria's declaration remains incomplete is not a technical detail. This leads us to the inevitable conclusion that, unlike the OPCW, Syria has not made serious efforts to comply with the requirements that it voluntarily accepted when it acceded to the Convention in 2013. There is no excuse for this. Furthermore, the possibility that additional stockpiles of chemical weapons, which could again be used against the Syrian population, exist in Syria cannot be denied or ignored.

Secondly, the OPCW fact-finding mission concluded that chemical weapons had been used on numerous occasions and the joint investigation and identification team (IIT) attributed responsibility for a number of them to the Syrian regime.

- ⇒ In the face of the Council's refusal to extend the mandate of the Joint Investigation Mechanism (JIM), the IIT was established as an OPCW instrument to continue the investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons. Last April's IIT report confirmed the use of chemical weapons in Ltamenah in 2017, and described a broader pattern of behaviour by the Syrian authorities: violence against its own population, including the use of chemical weapons, is an integral part of Syria's military strategy. We fully support the IIT and call on Syria to guarantee access to its territory.

Thirdly, the need for this Council to discuss this issue on a monthly basis has been questioned as a distraction from more urgent matters. However, this meeting is not just a habit. This Council adopted Resolution 2118 in 2013. Syria is still not complying with this resolution and thus remains a constant threat to international peace and security.

Belgium was elected to the Security Council under the slogan "Fostering Consensus and Acting for Peace". It is precisely this approach that guides us in this matter. We will always seek to promote consensus and, where possible, create the conditions for greater understanding among OPCW Member States. At the same time, we will also always take responsibility for defending our values.

- ⇒ During our tenure on the Council, however, we have seen efforts to promote a false narrative through misinformation, with a view to polarising the discussion in the Security Council. Time and again, independent investigations have refuted any attempt to create an alternative reality. It is time to recognise that this Council has no interest in espousing conspiracy theories. They weaken the role that this Council can play in maintaining international peace and security and undermine its authority and, ultimately, its legitimacy. Both permanent and elected members have a shared interest in preserving the Council's mandate as envisaged by the Charter of the United Nations, including when that means opposing and speaking out against particular actors. Failure to do so amounts to a breach of the Charter.

Fourthly, accountability is an important tool for preventing the reappearance of chemical weapons. The fight against impunity has been at the heart of Belgium's actions for many years. We welcome the role played by mechanisms and bodies such as the IIIM and the ICC. The use of chemical weapons in international conflicts has been a war crime under the Rome Statute of the ICC since its inception. In 2010, Belgium successfully proposed an amendment to criminalise the use of chemical weapons as a war crime, including in non-international armed conflicts. We call on those States that have not yet done so to ratify the Rome Statute and this amendment.

- ⇒ Since our accession to this Council, some progress has been made in establishing responsibility for crimes committed in Syria. However, there is still much to be done.

Ambassador Arias, your task is particularly difficult. Let me assure you of my country's full commitment to your organisation and its objectives. And let me also congratulate you on your personal commitment.

Thank you.