



OPCW

Executive Council

Ninety-Seventh Session
6 – 8 July 2021

EC-97/NAT.64
6 July 2021
ENGLISH and FRENCH only

FRANCE

**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR LUIS VASSY PERMANENT
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC TO THE OPCW AT THE
NINETY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Mr Chairperson,
Mr Director-General,
Distinguished Ambassadors,

France aligns itself with the statement of the European Union. Allow me to add the following remarks in my national capacity.

Mr Chairperson, as you are presiding over your first regular session of the Executive Council (“the Council”), I should first like to congratulate you on your election. The French delegation has full confidence in you to lead our discussions in the coming months and thereby contribute to the success of our Organisation’s work.

This is the first time that we are meeting since the historic adoption by the Conference of the States Parties (“the Conference”) of the decision “Addressing the Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic” (C-25/DEC.9, dated 21 April 2021). This decision was submitted by France on behalf of 46 delegations; by adopting it with great seriousness, the Member States of the OPCW have acted responsibly and sent a strong message that the repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime is unacceptable and cannot go unanswered by the international community. Our Organisation, whose twenty-fifth anniversary we will celebrate next year, was established specifically to work towards a world free of chemical weapons. Doing nothing would have been a compromise of principle: a convention cannot be violated this way without consequence. At stake is the very credibility of the commitments that we all made in ratifying it, the integrity of the non-proliferation regime and, ultimately, our collective security.

Indeed, as we know, the Syrian conflict marked the re-emergence of the use of chemical weapons. While Syria committed in 2013 to give up its chemical programme and to destroy its stockpiles, and while resolution 2118 (2013) was adopted the same year by the United Nations Security Council, many questions about the completeness and veracity of the Syrian initial declaration remain unanswered. We note with concern the addition of a new issue, the twentieth, to the long list already established by the Declaration Assessment Team. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Technical Secretariat (“the Secretariat”) for its 30 June presentation on the Syrian chemical dossier, and to commend the remarkable work that its members have carried out for nearly eight years with tenacity, professionalism, and independence.



Nearly eight years, during which the Syrian regime has continued to use chemical weapons against its own people. The use of these horrendous weapons is irrefutable and has been repeatedly demonstrated by impartial and independent international bodies. The OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) issued on 12 April 2021 its second report, which we will have the opportunity to consider during this session of the Council. Some will most certainly try to discredit the work of the Secretariat with their hollow verbiage, but let us be clear: there is no room for doubt. With meticulous work, and after taking into consideration all possible leads, the IIT has once again concluded that the Air Force of the Syrian regime, under the control of the so-called "Tiger Forces", was responsible for the chemical attack perpetrated in Saraqib on 4 February 2018.

You are already aware of my country's commitment to the fight against impunity. In January 2018, France spearheaded the establishment of an International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, which is now made up of 40 States and the European Union, and which made a public declaration last May in response to the conclusions of that second report. We support the international mechanisms against impunity set up under the aegis of the United Nations. Cooperation between the OPCW and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) will help in the fight against impunity for attacks involving the use of chemical weapons.

I reaffirm today that the decision taken in April is not irreversible, as our ultimate goal is the dismantling of Syria's chemical arsenal to prevent any further use of these weapons. We call on Syria at last to cooperate with the Secretariat, in good faith, and to comply with its international obligations. That is the only possible way for Syria to regain its rights and privileges at the OPCW, as set out in the decision adopted by the Conference at its Twenty-Fifth Session. We will return to this in more detail under the relevant agenda items.

Beyond that, we would recall that only a credible, viable, and inclusive political solution in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) can bring an end to the Syrian conflict.

The nerve agent against Mr Alexei Navalny on 20 August 2020 on the territory of the Russian Federation was shocking to us all.

France shares the conclusions of several of its European partners and the Secretariat regarding the facts surrounding the poisoning with a nerve agent belonging to the novichok group. We condemn in the strongest terms the shocking and reckless use of such an agent. The use of chemical weapons anywhere, anytime, by anyone, and under any circumstances is unacceptable and contravenes international norms against the use of such weapons.

We regret that Russia has withdrawn its request for a technical assistance visit, which was made here in this very room in October 2020. It is imperative that light be shed on this crime and on those who perpetrated it, that those responsible are held to account, and that all steps are taken to prevent the recurrence of such attacks.

We cannot stress enough that OPCW verification missions are essential for the security of all. I would like to thank the Director-General for the publication of the Draft Programme and Budget for 2022–2023, which we will examine carefully. France is deeply committed to verification activities and the conduct of the resulting inspections, which are at the heart of the

OPCW's mandate. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we made it a priority to guarantee access to OPCW teams to inspectable sites on our territory, as soon as health conditions allowed. The inspections conducted in autumn 2020, in spring 2021, and in early summer 2021 were all carried out under excellent conditions thanks to the professionalism of the Secretariat.

Allow me to emphasise also to which extent the pandemic must lead us to rethink and adapt our working methods. It is essential that we work together to find solutions to ensure that the Organisation is able to fulfil its mandate, even under exceptional circumstances. We therefore support the initiative led by Germany in this regard, and hope that together we will be able to formulate a consensual draft, since this is a matter of ensuring the continuity of our work, a fundamental objective that unites all of us States Parties to the Convention.

France moreover has been a long-standing supporter of the Organisation, because of the importance of its missions to our collective security. This is why we have decided to make voluntary financial contributions to various programmes, from the fund for the OPCW's activities in Syria, to the fund for the construction of the future Centre for Chemistry and Technology, to the fund for cybersecurity. Soon we will contribute to activities related to international cooperation and assistance programmes in French-speaking African countries, aimed at strengthening their protective capabilities against chemical incidents, including in the event of the use of chemical weapons by non-State actors.

We welcome the willingness of the Director-General to continue his mandate for another four years and thereby continue with the efforts undertaken in the fight against the re-emergence of the use of chemical weapons. France reiterates its full confidence in him and in all members of the Secretariat, who each day work to achieve the objective that we have set for ourselves, namely, a world forever free of chemical weapons.

I would ask that this statement be considered as an official document of this session of the Council and that it be published on the OPCW's internal and external servers.

Thank you.

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