

**UNITED
NATIONS****MEETINGS COVERAGE**

Questions Remain over Syria's Chemical Weapons Programme, Security Council Hears, as Speakers Call for Agreement on Suitable Accountability Mechanism

After more than four years of work, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was still unable to verify that Syria's initial declaration on its chemical weapons programme was accurate, delegates told the Security Council today, underlining that questions remained about the use of such weapons in that country.

Discussions between the OPCW Technical Secretariat and the Syrian Government were continuing, although they had not led to the resolution of any of the remaining issues regarding the completeness and accuracy of Syria's initial declaration, said Thomas Markram, Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

Stressing that resolving those outstanding issues would allow for shared confidence in Syria's declaration across the international community, he emphasized: "The persistent allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria underscore the need to identify solutions and reach agreement on an appropriate accountability mechanism."

The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission was continuing its work and was currently in Damascus looking into allegations of the use of chemical weapons that were brought to the attention of the OPCW Director-General by the Government, said Mr. Markram. The next report of the Fact-Finding Mission would be submitted when it considered that it had sufficient information and was in a position to draw a conclusion.

In the meantime, the Syrian Government had continued efforts to destroy the two remaining chemical weapons production facilities in the country, he said, adding that destruction of those facilities was expected to be complete within two to three months from the start date and would be verified by OPCW.

Expressing concern that OPCW was still unable to verify Syria's initial declaration on its chemical weapons programme, the representative of Sweden noted there were still a number of serious outstanding issues that had yet to be resolved. Specifically, the Director-General last month reported that the initial 5 outstanding questions had grown to 22, including the case of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre.

Emphasizing that sarin and chlorine stocks did indeed exist in Syria, France's representative said that the country had either deceived the Council or pursued a clandestine chemical weapons programme. Given those two options, France called on Syria to respond to all unanswered questions, "and there are many of them". The Damascus-based regime's responsibility for the use of chemical weapons had been publicly and unambiguously established by the Joint Investigative Mechanism and any attempt to discredit its clear conclusion could not change that reality, he said, stressing that impunity for those who used chemical weapons was not an option.

The speaker for the United States said a few years ago, a single chemical weapons attack would have united the Council in shock and anger, but now there was a regime that used them "practically every other week". Letting one regime off the hook emboldened others, she said, adding that the world was rapidly sliding back to a time when people lived in fear of colourless, shapeless gas leaving them gasping for air. Her country refused to believe that the Council could not come together once again on chemical weapons, despite differences between its members.

Echoing those concerns, the United Kingdom's representative noted that, in the absence of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, there was no proper channel to ensure accountability. Substantive gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies in Syria's declaration remained and the seriousness of the situation had increased over time. Turning to the recent poisoning in the town of Salisbury in her country, she said no explanation had been provided as to how a military-grade nerve agent had come to be used to sicken two people. There should be no more victims of chemical weapons attacks, whether they took place in the war zones of Syria or in an English town, she stressed.

The representative of the Russian Federation said that the conclusions of the Joint Investigative Mechanism were nothing more than a pre-ordained, pre-programmed result aimed at accusing the Syrian authorities. The Russian Federation was unable to support extension of the Mechanism's mandate in an unchanged form, he said, highlighting that his delegation had proposed a specific alternative and circulated a draft resolution which was currently "in blue".

Syria's representative said that his Government had fulfilled its commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention and Council resolution 2118 (2013). It had eliminated its chemical weapons programme in record time, which was a first in the history of OPCW, he stressed, and the Joint Investigative Mechanism had confirmed that fact in its June 2014 report. The

Syrian Army did not use chemical weapons nor did it possess them, rather they had been used against civilians by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), Nusrah Front and other associated entities.

Also speaking today were the representatives of the Netherlands, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Ethiopia, China, Bolivia, Côte d'Ivoire, Poland, Equatorial Guinea and Peru.

The meeting began at 10:03 a.m. and ended at 11:47 a.m.

Briefing

THOMAS MARKRAM, Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, said that the Syrian Government had continued efforts to destroy the two remaining chemical weapons production facilities in the country. Destruction of those facilities was expected to be complete within two to three months from the start date and would be verified by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), he said, stressing that the long-awaited and verified destruction of the two facilities was an essential step towards the full implementation of Security Council resolution 2118 (2013). Discussions between the OPCW Technical Secretariat and the Syrian Government were continuing, although they had not led to the resolution of any of the remaining issues. "The OPCW Technical Secretariat continues to be unable to confirm the completeness and accuracy of Syria's declaration," he said, underscoring that resolving those outstanding issues would permit shared confidence in Syria's declaration within the international community.

The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission was continuing its work and was currently in Damascus looking into allegations of the use of chemical weapons that were brought to the attention of the OPCW Director-General by the Government, he said. The next report of the Fact-Finding Mission would be submitted when it considered that it had sufficient information and was in a position to draw a conclusion, although those conclusions would not entail attribution of responsibility in those cases where the use of chemical weapons was determined. "The persistent allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria underscore the need to identify solutions and reach agreement on an appropriate accountability mechanism," he emphasized, adding that the Secretary-General and the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs had repeatedly underlined the need to avoid impunity and ensure that those responsible for the use of chemical weapons were identified and held responsible.

Statements

NIKKI R. HALEY (United States) said the Council often talked about chemical weapons, but she worried that sometimes it lost sight of the human side of chemical weapons attacks. A century had lapsed between the first use of chemical weapons in the First World War and the chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykun one year ago today, and in that time, several international instruments sought to prohibit such weapons. The international community dared to believe that one day chemical weapons would be relegated to the history books. Then came Syria, where shared disgust led the Council to adopt resolution 2118 (2013) requiring the scheduled destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, followed in 2015 by the creation of the Joint Investigative Mechanism on Chemical Weapons Use in Syria. The United Nations found that the Assad regime, as well as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), had been responsible for the use of chemical weapons, and the Council dared to believe that consensus over the use of such weapons would hold. "But, we know what happened next," she said. The Assad regime continued to use chemical weapons, with one Council member shielding that regime from the consequences.

The world today was a more dangerous place, with the Assad regime dropping chlorine bombs on men, women and children, she said. A few years ago, a single chemical weapons attack would have united the Council in shock and anger, but now there was a regime that used them "practically every other week". Letting one regime off the hook emboldened others, she said, adding that the world was rapidly sliding back to a time when people lived in fear of colourless, shapeless gas leaving them gasping for air. Even as the Council remained deadlocked, some had stood up to demand accountability, with the General Assembly approving an impartial mechanism to investigate serious crimes in Syria and France establishing a partnership against impunity for the use of chemical weapons. At the same time, people in Syria were facing the terrifying reality of such heinous weapons. She invited Marmoun Morad, a Syrian physician who treated victims of the Khan Shaykun attack, present in the Council chamber this morning, to stand up, and saluted him for his courage and determination. He was present today to be an inspiration for all Council members, she said, adding that, if Mr. Morad was not going to stop treating victims of chemical weapons attacks, then the Council must not stop working to eliminate such weapons and to hold to account anyone, anywhere who used them. Concluding, she said her country refused to believe that the Council could not come together once again on chemical weapons, despite any differences between its members.

KAREL JAN GUSTAAF VAN OOSTEROM (Netherlands) recalled that Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention almost five years ago, having promised to destroy and abandon its chemical weapons programme; yet month after month there was news that the Syrian regime's declaration could not be considered complete or accurate. One year ago, the Assad regime carried out the heinous 4 April 2017 chemical attack against Khan Shaykhun that resulted in the deaths of about 100 innocent Syrian civilians, including many children. The use of chemical weapons should never go unpunished, he stressed. The Council must act upon the conclusions of the Joint Investigative Mechanism and the outcomes of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission. Further, the Council must intensify its efforts to achieve a mechanism that could continue the meticulous work of the Joint Investigative Mechanism.

KAREN PIERCE ([United Kingdom](#)) recalled that the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission had concluded that sarin had been used at Khan Shaykhun and the Joint Investigative Mechanism had concluded that the Syrian regime was responsible for that attack. After more than four years of work, OPCW had yet to verify that Syria's declaration was accurate. Gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies remained which were not trivial points of minor detail — they were substantive and the seriousness of the situation had increased over time. There could be no impunity, she said, pointing out that, in the absence of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, there was no proper mechanism to ensure accountability. There was still no explanation provided as to how a military-grade nerve agent had come to be used in the poisoning in Salisbury. There should be no more victims of chemical weapons attacks; whether they took place in the war zones of Syria or in an English town.

KAIRAT UMAROV ([Kazakhstan](#)) said that the use of chemical weapons was absolutely unacceptable under any circumstances. His delegation was pleased that during the reporting period there had been some progress towards the destruction of the remaining two chemical weapons production facilities in Syria, although, at the same time, he expressed concern about the lack of progress in clarifying all outstanding issues regarding the Government's initial declaration. The Council had not yet restored its investigative potential, he noted, stressing the need for every effort to be made to find common ground on the issue. It was extremely important and necessary to overcome all differences among Council members that prevented the complete elimination of the threat of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

FRANÇOIS DELATTRE ([France](#)) said the responsibility of the Damascus-based regime for the use of chemical weapons had been publicly and unambiguously established by the Joint Investigative Mechanism. Any attempt to discredit and to cast into oblivion the clear conclusion of the Joint Investigative Mechanism could not change that reality. Emphasizing that sarin and chlorine stocks did, indeed, exist in Syria, he said that country had either deceived the Council or pursued a clandestine chemical weapons programme. Given those two options, France called on Syria to respond to all unanswered questions, "and there are many of them". Reiterating his country's full support for OPCW, he said the use of chemical weapons was a moral offense that undermined the fundamental standards of international law, as well as the credibility of the non-proliferation regime. A taboo had been broken in Syria, as in Salisbury and elsewhere. He went on to emphasize that impunity for those who used chemical weapons was not an option. Their use against civilians was a war crime and a crime against humanity, and perpetrators must be held to account. If there was an area in which the Council's credibility was at stake, it was chemical weapons, he said, delivering an urgent appeal for Council members to overcome their political differences and put an end to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. That much was owed to civilians, who were the main victims of such weapons, and to the international non-proliferation regime.

MANSOUR AYYAD SH. A. ALOTAIBI ([Kuwait](#)) said that, due to divisions within the Council, the justice he had hoped for in the Khan Shaykhun incident had "vanished into thin air". The continued use of chemical weapons in Syria four years after the adoption of resolution 2118 (2013) was unacceptable. His delegation backed any mechanism that could achieve consensus in the Council and hold those responsible for committing such crimes to account, according to the principles outlined in resolution 2118 (2013). Indeed, the draft resolution tabled by the United States contained such elements. As such, he called on Member States to use that draft as the basis for future negotiations on any such mechanism. Stressing the importance of bringing perpetrators of chemical crimes to justice, he expressed support for the work of Joint Investigative Mechanism in assisting in the investigation and prosecution of such crimes in Syria and looked forward to hearing the results of its first report, which would be discussed on 17 April in the General Assembly.

TEKEDA ALEMU ([Ethiopia](#)) expressed concern for the "barbaric" chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun one year ago and called for those responsible to be held accountable. Without a unified response from the Council, damage to the chemical weapons disarmament and non-proliferation regime could not be repaired. He expressed hope that the Syrian Government — with the support of OPCW — would eliminate its two remaining stationary above-ground facilities. In that connection, he reiterated the importance of continued communication between OPCW and the Syrian Government with the ultimate objective of addressing remaining gaps and inconsistencies. Meanwhile, it was imperative that the investigative work of the OPCW's Fact-Finding Mission continued on all allegations of chemical weapons use. Nevertheless, the Council had to address the current institutional gap by creating an independent, impartial and professional investigative mechanism that could identify all State and non-State actors responsible for such crimes.

WU HAITAO ([China](#)) said that his delegation was greatly concerned by the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria and firmly opposed the use of such weapons under any circumstances. Recent incidents of suspected use of toxic chemicals were deeply concerning, and in that regard, establishing a new investigative mechanism to find out the truth and prevent the recurrent use of such weapons was of vital importance. All parties should continue to insist that the Security Council and OPCW should be the main channels for addressing the use of chemical weapons. He hoped that the Syrian Government would continue to cooperate with OPCW on the resolution of the initial declaration and properly resolve the outstanding issues. Political settlement was the only way to resolve the Syria issue, and in that context, the international community should support the next round of Geneva talks.

JUAN MARCELO ZAMBRANA TORRELIO ([Bolivia](#)) expressed concern about the latest reports of alleged uses of chemical weapons in Syria and believed that there could be no justification for the use of such weapons, irrespective of the circumstances. His delegation strongly supported the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and called on all parties to ensure an investigation could be carried out in a transparent and effective manner. However, there was still the need for a mechanism

to identify the perpetrators so they could stand trial before the competent bodies. The Security Council must not be politicized or exploited on that issue, he said, calling on the parties to seek greater dialogue to create an investigative mechanism. The only way to resolve the conflict was through a political process led by the Syrian people.

CARL SKAU ([Sweden](#)) said the failure to agree on a new, independent and impartial attributive mechanism for chemical weapons use in Syria cast a particularly dark shadow on the Council. He condemned the continued and repeated use of chemical weapons in Syria, which constituted a serious violation of international law and a threat to international peace and security. Regarding the implementation of resolution 2118 (2013), he expressed concern that OPCW was still unable to confirm whether Syria's initial declaration on its chemical weapons programme was accurate and complete. Indeed, there were still a number of serious outstanding issues. More specifically, the Director-General last month reported that the initial 5 outstanding questions had grown to 22, including the case of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre. He went on to express deep regret that the Council had failed to agree on an extension of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, which was essential to protect the international disarmament and non-proliferation regime and ensure accountability.

BERNARD TANOHO-BOUTCHOUE ([Côte d'Ivoire](#)) said cooperation among the Syrian Government, OPCW and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) aimed at the destruction of remaining chemical weapons production units was encouraging. He also thanked those States which had contributed to the Syria Trust Fund for the Destruction of Chemical Weapons. However, major challenges persisted, he said, urging Syria to continue its cooperation with OPCW to address outstanding issues, including the destruction of remaining chemical weapons facilities. Any use of chemical weapons was a breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention and a violation of hard-won international standards banning such weapons. He encouraged OPCW, the Fact-Finding Mission and the Syrian Government to continue their cooperation, and called for a political settlement to the Syrian conflict.

PAWEL RADOMSKI ([Poland](#)) said his delegation had taken note with utmost concern that the OPCW Technical Secretariat had been unable to confirm whether declarations submitted by Syria were accurate and complete. Once again, Poland joined the Secretary-General in calling on Syria to extend its fullest cooperation with the declaration assessment team. A clear message must be sent that the use of chemical weapons by anyone would not be tolerated, and the international community must be empowered to address each and every chemical weapons attack and to hold perpetrators accountable. Poland believed that the United States draft resolution was a good basis for further discussion on investigating the use of chemical weapons. He emphasized that the credibility of the non-proliferation regime, as well as collective security were at stake. Poland also hoped that those responsible for the reckless act in Salisbury would soon be held accountable.

ANATOLIO NDONG MBA ([Equatorial Guinea](#)) said the use of chemical weapons posed a clear threat to international peace and security. The divergent positions of Council members had demonstrated that the end to the use of chemical weapons in Syria hinged on an inclusive political agreement. His delegation affirmed the urgent need for an investigative mechanism, calling it a collective responsibility and moral obligation to the victims of the conflict. He called for Council members to recall their important role in the promotion of international peace and security.

VASSILY A. NEBENZIA ([Russian Federation](#)) said it would be constructive to conduct a thorough analysis of the Khan Shaykhun incident and the consequences of that event in the context of global and regional security. The circumstances around that incident remained obscure. The so-called work done by the Joint Investigative Mechanism could not be taken seriously by professionals. The conclusions of that Mechanism were nothing more than a pre-ordained, pre-programmed result aimed at accusing the Syrian authorities. They ran counter to the laws of physics, chemistry, aviation, ballistics and explosive matters. Experts did not travel to the location where the incident occurred and they had built their guesses on information received from armed groups and dubious structures that supported terrorist groups, including the white helmets.

The Russian Federation was unable to support the extension of the Joint Investigative Mechanism mandate in an unchanged form, he said. Armed groups had amassed considerable capacity in chemical warfare. His delegation had proposed a specific alternative to the former Joint Investigative Mechanism and circulated a draft resolution which was currently "in blue". The urgent need was to conduct an analysis of the production of chemical weapons by non-State actors, as well as their effective use of those toxic substances. Nevertheless, Western colleagues were insisting on the recreation of a mechanism that was convenient for them and that would rubber stamp their own conclusions. International law fell to pieces when suspicions became the queen of evidence. Countries continued to confidently announce that chemical weapons were being used by Damascus, despite the absence of evidence and the clear political and military objectives behind such allegations. Lastly, he called for a Council meeting on Thursday regarding the incident in Salisbury.

GUSTAVO MEZA-CUADRA ([Peru](#)), Council President for April, speaking in his national capacity, said chemical weapons attacks were atrocities committed in open defiance of the non-proliferation regime, as well as a threat to international peace and security which the Council could not allow. He expressed Peru's concern about the accuracy of the Syrian Government's declarations, adding that the Syrian authorities must be encouraged to provide all information without delay. Paying tribute to the Fact-Finding Mission, he said its work must be complemented by an independent mechanism that would make it possible to assign responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in line with international law.

MOUNZER MOUNZER (Syria) said Syria had fulfilled its commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention and Council resolution 2118 (2013). It had also always fully cooperated — in a positive, transparent and flexible manner — despite great challenges and a complicated and difficult security situation. The Syrian Government had been able to eliminate its chemical weapons programme in record time, which was a first in the history of OPCW. The Joint Investigative Mechanism confirmed that in its June 2014 report. But, rather than commending the Government for its efforts, some Council members — including the United States, which had not destroyed its chemical arsenal, United Kingdom and France — had mastered the art of deception and misinformation to dominate the world and take it back to the era of colonialism and trusteeship. They were investing in new Council meeting formats with one clear goal: to obstruct the Syrian army's progress against armed terrorist groups which they supported. He referred to theatrics staged by "white helmets" whose claims about the use of chemical weapons in eastern Ghouta coincided with its liberation from armed terrorist groups.

Recalling the incident in Khan Shaykhun, he said the Joint Investigative Mechanism had refused to visit that location, relying instead on false witness statements and so-called open sources whose work was unfounded and lacking in credibility. His Government had insisted before the Council and the OPCW Executive Council that it condemned the use of chemical weapons and any other weapon of mass destruction for any reason in any place. The Syrian Army did not use chemical weapons nor did it possess them, he said. Rather, they had been used against civilians by ISIL, Nusra Front and other associated entities. He said his Government had sent the Council and specialized agencies 130 letters on the possession, production and use of chemical weapons by armed terrorist groups, but, unfortunately, it never got an answer regarding measures that the Council might take against those States which facilitated terrorist access to such weapons. He went on to ask how the United States, United Kingdom and France could claim to be committed to justice while having carried out "blood-curdling attacks" in several countries in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean over many years.

The partnership against impunity established by France represented an attempt to set up a politicized parallel mechanism that would serve the interests of States opposed to the Syrian Government, he said. His Government was committed to implementing its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and it would continue its war against terrorists regardless of political blackmail and cheap attempts to exploit the suffering of the Syrian people. Concluding, he asked the representative of the Netherlands why no information had been provided about chemical agents aboard an aircraft that fell on Amsterdam in 1992, creating an orange-coloured explosion.

 **For information media. Not an official record.**
