



Chemical Weapons: from Ypres to Aleppo

Statement by

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I am honoured to be here with you at this colloquium.

It is now one hundred years today since the first large-scale use, in battle, of chemical weapons. Only a few years ago, it was assumed that commemorations of this centenary would reflect on the use of such weapons from a distance. We presumed that discussions such as these would take place with a certainty that their use had truly been consigned to the past.

Perhaps we were complacent. As we now know, the very title of this colloquium – “Chemical Weapons from Ypres to Aleppo” – highlights a particular tragedy: that the use of chemical weapons does not reside on the proverbial ash heap of history. Rather, it has continued.

This region of Europe knows full well the scourge of these terrible weapons, as do all those nations whose armed forces and civilians have suffered from their use. It has been said, correctly, that war – all war – is hell. The city of Ypres itself became synonymous with the horror of warfare. As the war poet Robert Laurence Binyon put it, when describing the aftermath of the Battle: “she rose, dead, into never-dying fame.”

The particular horrors of chemical warfare, however, so shocked the conscience of the international community that, in 1925, the Geneva Protocol to the Hague Conventions was established, which banned the use of chemical and biological weapons.

I am encouraged that, despite this inauspicious start, by the end of the twentieth century the possession and development of these weapons had also been banned, first by the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and then, in 1997, by the Chemical Weapons Convention. My sincere hope is that this prohibition will soon include nuclear weapons, as well.

Nonetheless, in spite of such progress, the threat from chemical weapons is one that has reared its head periodically throughout the past hundred years. Recall that the 22nd of April, 1915, was not even the only use of chemical weapons in that battle. It was simply the first use.

Indeed, chemical weapons were widely deployed in almost all theatres in the First World War and then in the Second. In addition to the immediate victims of such use, it should not be forgotten that these weapons left behind a legacy: old and abandoned chemical weapons continue to present a problem for many countries, including – of course – Belgium. It has been one hundred years, and yet the Great War is still with us, both figuratively and literally.

More recently, during the 1980s, chemical weapons were used in Iran and in Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the victims of chemical weapons use in Halabja shocked the world at a time when the negotiations for a Chemical Weapons

Convention were underway in Geneva. Then, in the 1990s, the sarin attacks on the subway in Tokyo unveiled a new threat: the possibility of the use of chemical weapons by non-State actors.

Finally, as you are all aware, only two years ago, the use of chemical weapons in Syria was confirmed by a UN mission sent to investigate allegations of their use. My Office – the Office for Disarmament Affairs – played the coordinating role in deploying this investigation.

The mission was a success. Not only did it achieve its mandate, but it played a crucial part in the subsequent accession, by Syria, to the Chemical Weapons Convention. This in turn gave rise to successful efforts by the OPCW, the UN and the international community, to remove and eliminate Syria's declared chemical weapons programme. At the same time, the mission brought home to me – and to all my colleagues – the brutal reality of chemical weapons.

Sadly, the spectre of the use of chemical weapons continues to be raised. In particular, there are allegations that chlorine, which once drifted over the battlefields of Ypres, is being used again in Syria.

The OPCW has investigated such allegations and has, regrettably, concluded with a high degree of confidence that toxic chemicals, most likely chlorine, were used as a weapon in Syria. In the face of ongoing allegations, the OPCW is continuing its investigations. In so doing, it has the full support of the United Nations and the Secretary-General.

This colloquium therefore comes at an important juncture in the history of chemical weapons. It has been said that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. It would be wonderful if the reverse were true: that merely by remembering the horrors of chemical weapons we can prevent their future use. Of course, we all know that it is not that simple.

That does not detract from the value of our discussions today. Forums such as these cannot put an end to the threat of chemical weapons, but they do provide an invaluable opportunity to learn from history. They provide important guidance on how all of us can deal with remaining tasks, as well as future challenges. And by our remembrance of history, we honour the victims of chemical weapons, whether on the fields of Ypres, in the town of Halabja, on the subways of Tokyo and in the cities and villages of Syria.

And, finally, we should recall that Ypres, the site of their first use in battle and of some of the fiercest fighting of the First World War, rose from the ashes of war to become a city of peace.

Ypres serves as an example of the good that can be achieved, even in the aftermath of severe destruction. I have no doubt that the moral compass that

eventually pointed the way to the Chemical Weapons Convention, will likewise lead to the elimination of these weapons, as well as the elimination of all other weapons of mass destruction. It is long past the time for the world to awaken, once and for all, from this nightmare.

I wish you every success in your discussions today.