



Remarks on the Challenge of Chemical Weapons

By

Angela Kane

United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs



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I am very grateful to the Permanent Mission of Finland for organizing this event on “The Challenge of Chemical Weapons”—especially given that Ambassador Jarmo Viinanen has agreed to serve as this panel’s moderator. Finland has a long and distinguished record of support for the elimination and non-proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction, so it did not at all surprise me that the Mission would take the initiative in organizing this particular event.

Let me say at the outset—from a very personal perspective since I have recently been deeply involved with chemical weapons issues—that I think it is somewhat premature to be putting forward “lessons learned” based on the limited experience in Syria. After all, some of the most sensitive chemical disarmament activities there have only just begun and there are many uncertainties about what lies ahead—even more so given the unpredictable course of the ongoing civil war in that country.

Besides, I think there are probably still lessons to learn from the horrible chemical attack at Ypres, Belgium in April 1915. The lesson-learning experience is ongoing and may even be open-ended.

If asked to assess the significance of what has happened this year as a result of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, I do think some preliminary observations are in order.

First, the global norm or taboo against the use of chemical weapons has undoubtedly been strengthened. One need only look at the overwhelming revulsion these attacks have generated not just among governments throughout the world, but also among the public at large. The combined idealism and realism that inspired the negotiation of the Chemical Weapons Convention has been strongly reaffirmed by these recent tragic events.

Second, the world community concluded long ago that the 1925 Geneva Protocol—which banned only the *use* of chemical or biological weapons—would be inadequate to ensuring that their use would in fact never again occur. It was recognition of this fact that inspired the world community to shift from an arms-control to a disarmament approach in dealing with chemical weapons. In short, the view became widespread that the best way to prevent use was through a multilateral regime combining the prohibition and elimination of the weapons themselves.

As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated at the 2007 High-Level Meeting to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the CWC, the history of that convention “shows that real disarmament is possible through collective action within the framework of the United Nations.” I think there is a lesson here that also applies to nuclear weapons.

Third, the United Nations has over many decades developed a set of five multilateral principles to guide the process of disarmament. These include transparency, verification, irreversibility, universality, and bindingness. The experience of the CWC, and the ongoing chemical disarmament operations in Syria, strongly reaffirm these specific principles. Syria’s accession to the CWC both helped to bring the convention closer to universality and established a binding legal commitment, coupled with verification, transparency, and a technical basis for reducing dramatically the likelihood of reversibility.

Fourth, despite some chronic criticism of the United Nations for its perceived weaknesses in maintaining international peace and security, the recent Syria experience offers some

convincing evidence of the unique and vital role of the United Nations system in dealing with complicated tasks relating to the use and elimination of chemical weapons.

The UN's Office for Disarmament Affairs has for years been cooperating closely with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the World Health Organization in this field. We have gotten to know each other's capabilities and limitations. We have shared information and engaged in exercises. Most importantly, we have developed a legal and institutional framework to implement the Secretary-General's Mechanism established by the General Assembly in 1987. By the time allegations of use of these weapons in Syria emerged earlier this year, we were prepared. And when the tragic attack occurred on 21 August in Ghouta, field personnel were on the ground conducting an investigation just days later—this is an unprecedented response for such activities under extremely difficult circumstances.

The experience of the UN and OPCW in implementing the investigation mechanism provided invaluable operational experience that allowed them to quickly spring into action to begin verifying the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons programme. Indeed, in both contexts – investigation and elimination – one could argue that the international organizations have already proven their indispensability. They have unique functions that no individual State or combination of States could perform with equivalent effectiveness and international legitimacy in the eyes of world public opinion.

My fifth point here is to note that the use of chemical weapons in Syria has further strengthened the legal and political arguments of those who believe that weapons of mass destruction should be eliminated because of their catastrophic humanitarian effects. We are witnessing today a resurgence of international interest in affirming the applicability of international humanitarian and human rights law when it comes to the use of such weapons. This welcome renaissance of the humanitarian basis of disarmament extends far beyond Syria and far beyond chemical weapons. It is the leading edge of the global campaign against nuclear weapons and the movement is growing. One could say that we are witnessing not only a triumph of multilateralism but also a step forward for the international rule of law.

This progress, of course, is far from complete and many challenges lie ahead. Achieving universal membership in the CWC is certainly a priority. Many tons of chemical agents still remain to be destroyed, as some States have yet to conclude their disarmament commitments. Within the Secretary-General's Mechanism, the UN/OPCW/WHO relationship will no doubt continue to evolve in the years ahead, as it adapts to changing circumstances. While it is not possible to forecast how that relationship will change, the existing institutional arrangements that comprise this cooperation have shown that they can adapt to new challenges as they arise and I see no reason why they will cease to be able to do so in the future.

I do hope that there is a deeper public understanding of how these organizations can work together. This may well be one of the products of this Panel today: to deepen public awareness. For this reason, I commend the Finnish Mission once again for organizing this event. Although what might be called "Global Chemical Zero" has not yet been achieved, we are well along our way on the road to that destination. With strong leadership by States and civil society groups, we may reach that goal sooner than we might think.