



A Century of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Enough!

Statement by

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At the outset I wish to thank the municipalities of Ypres and Langemarck-Poelkapelle for inviting me to speak today. The histories of your cities are not only intertwined with the use of weapons of mass destruction but, more importantly, with the campaign to educate the world as to why these weapons must never be used again. For that, we thank you.

I also extend my thanks to the International Network of Mayors for Peace. Your work to spread the message about the dangers of weapons of mass destruction is both worthy and necessary.

One hundred years ago weapons of mass destruction – chlorine, and later phosgene and sulphur mustard chemical weapons – were released in and around Ypres. In fact, sulphur mustard was first called Yperite as it was released near Ypres in July 1917. The use of these weapons to injure, incapacitate and kill were immediate and devastating, killing and maiming combatants and civilians alike. If the wind blew erratically, the villages that lay in the path of the grey-green cloud suffered the same fate as soldiers in the trenches.

Gas warfare between 1915 and 1918 inflicted more than one million casualties and killed over 90,000 people. At least 250,000 of the casualties caused by poison gas were civilians. And the destructive effects did not end with Armistice Day. A century later we are still recovering thousands of shells and unexploded ordnances from the Western Front. Of the close to 200 tonnes of shells and munitions recovered each year in the so called “iron harvest” about ten percent are chemical weapons munitions. The destruction of these at the facilities at Poelkapelle is a necessary job. In the course of collecting and destroying these remnants of war many lives have been lost but many more would die if this were not done.

We come here today to remember those terrible events, the repercussions of which shocked the world and led to the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning their use. The international community swore to remain vigilant, to never forget those horrors, to learn from them and to ensure they never happened again.

How sad it is then, that a century later we still find ourselves living in the deathly shadow of weapons of mass destruction. How disappointing it is that the world remains filled with weapons that are disproportionate and indiscriminate; weapons that precipitate the mass killings of civilians; weapons that have the destructive power to end all human life.

Less than two years ago, confirmation of the use of chemical weapons in Syria served as a shocking reminder that chemical weapons had not yet been consigned to history. Allegations of the use of chemical weapons continue. That some of these allegations involve the use of chlorine gas is a bitter irony.

In this context, the multinational effort to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons programme was a momentous undertaking and an important achievement. It shows not only that the taboo against chemical weapons remains intact, but stands as an illustration of the power of international cooperation in the service of a common goal.

It underlines the enduring importance and value of the Chemical Weapons Convention and the need for those few countries that still remain outside the Convention to adhere to it without further delay and achieve universal membership. It is a timely reminder for all States that have yet to do so to complete the destruction of their chemical weapons stockpiles.

As the Secretary General said in his message, we cannot despair and wring our hands. We must get on with the job at hand and we must do so by focusing on that which unites us, our common ground as humanity. There are many challenges that lie ahead, but with political will, we can overcome them.

The global taboos against the possession or use of chemical and biological weapons remain strong. No State argues for their legality or for their value as an instrument of deterrence. Yet, the threat of a non-State actor appropriating a chemical, biological or – God forbid – a nuclear weapon is real. The daily images of the brutality these groups are capable of inflicting is gruesome enough; it does not bear thinking of what they would do should they obtain a genuine weapon of mass destruction.

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 Chemical Weapons Convention and the chemical disarmament operations in Syria strongly reaffirm these specific principles.

Achieving universal membership in the Biological and Chemical Weapon Conventions and the elimination of all types of weapons of mass destruction would go far toward satisfying some of our most revered tenets of international humanitarian law, especially the prohibition against the indiscriminate targeting of civilians.

As regards the third category of weapons of mass destruction – nuclear weapons – and despite clear evidence of the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons, there remain some 16,000 in arsenals around the globe, many on high alert status. These weapons and the chimera of deterrence remain central to the security doctrines of those who hold them, as demonstrated by their expensive plans to modernize and update their arsenals – plans which envisage retaining nuclear weapons for many decades to come.

The gap is widening between those who believe the abolition of nuclear weapons is a challenge to be overcome at some undetermined time and only when conditions are right, and those who believe they must be eliminated as soon as possible, preferably within a specified timeframe. This latter group represents the vast majority of NPT parties. They do not view the action plan as open-ended and they demand demonstrated proof that Nuclear Weapon States are acting to fulfil their obligations under Article VI of the Treaty.

This will be the key debate at the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – the NPT – as they review the implementation of the 64-point action plan agreed at the 2010 Review Conference.

This year, 2015, also marks the 70th anniversary of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the first and, thankfully, only use of nuclear weapons. It serves as a sobering reminder of the devastating human consequences of nuclear weapons and of the urgent need to rid them from the world.

In light of this imperative, the emergence over the last five years of a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament has provided a gathering momentum and injected fresh energy into a frozen debate. This movement seeks to underscore the devastating human impact of nuclear weapons, ground them in international humanitarian law and place the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons at the forefront of all nuclear disarmament

negotiations. We cannot wait for the catastrophic consequences from the use of nuclear weapons, intentional or via accidental or unauthorized means, to realise this. This initiative has sought new solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of nuclear weapons and created new constituencies for nuclear disarmament—uniting medical practitioners, climate scientists and relief workers with the peace and security community.

Some 155 States supported New Zealand's statement on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons in the General Assembly's First Committee last November. This number represents almost 80 per cent of UN Member States. It cannot be ignored.

One hundred years after the first use of weapons of mass destruction, it is time to say enough! As we gather here today to remember those terrible events of one hundred years ago, and the countless men and women killed and maimed, we also remember those that continue to be victims to the tools of violence used in the First World War.

Let us, as the Secretary General urged, take up our shared responsibility to pursue a universal ban on the possession and use of all weapons of mass destruction. Let us work to find our common ground on behalf of those who have perished and to ensure those generations yet to come to not have to endure the same fate. Thank you