
Chemical weapons

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Background

The use of chemical weapons is universally considered to be contrary to the laws against humanity and the dictates of public conscience. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) prohibits the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer, or use of these weapons. Twenty-one years after its entry into force, the CWC has 193 states parties and one signatory state. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is tasked with regulating treaty compliance. Russia—formerly the largest possessor of chemical weapons—is officially said to have completed the destruction of its stockpile in 2017.¹

Chemical weapons, which are inherently indiscriminate, are any toxic chemical or its precursor that can cause death, injury, temporary incapacitation or sensory irritation through its chemical action, and includes related munitions and delivery systems. Chlorine, mustard gas, and sarin are among the most used weaponised chemicals. Many of the chemicals that can be used as a weapon are dual-use.

Current context

The continued use of chemical weapons in Syria has eroded the norm against using these weapons. Over 85 confirmed chemical attacks have taken place in the country since 21 August 2013, the

day of the deadliest chemical attack in Syria to date. After the OPCW's Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) found the Syrian government responsible for the April 2017 sarin attack in Khan Sheikhoun, Russia used its veto in the UN Security Council to prevent the renewal of the JIM's mandate, preventing the OPCW from attributing accountability.²

However, in June this year, CWC states parties' voted by an overwhelming majority to authorise the OPCW to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. This is an important move towards accountability, and towards restoring the norm against chemical weapons more broadly.³ Unprecedented use of sophisticated nerve agents in other parts of the world, specifically in Malaysia and the UK, highlight the urgent necessity to assign responsibility for those violating the prohibition against chemical weapons.

A major review conference in November will take stock of the CWC. It will offer an opportunity for states parties to further strengthen the treaty to ensure the attribution of blame for chemical attacks anywhere and anytime. It is envisioned that statements during the 2018 First Committee will take a focus on these recent and upcoming developments.

The use of chemical weapons over the last few years was referenced in nearly every intervention during the 2017 First Committee general debate. In the thematic cluster on “Other weapons of mass destruction” some states urged to refer chemical weapons use to the International Criminal Court, and around a dozen states had reiterated support for renewing the mandate of the JIM.⁴ The vast majority of these references condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria specifically, by both state and non-state actors.

The First Committee resolution on the “Implementation of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction” was the final resolution to be adopted at last year’s session and required multiple paragraph voting. Traditionally this resolution is adopted without a vote but that has changed from 2014 onward, with the inclusion of references to use in Syria and elsewhere. In 2017, certain states accused the sponsor, Poland, and resolution supporters of politicising what is meant to be a “neutral” resolution. This occurred in tandem with Russia vetoing renewal of the JIM in the Security Council.⁵ Due to continued challenges in adequately dealing with new use

of chemical weapons, this year’s discussion is expected to be equally contentious and heated.

Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should:

- Highlight and publicly condemn any ongoing activities that are prohibited under the CWC;
- Indicate support for the OPCW’s renewed mandate to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria;
- Endorse the UN Secretary-General’s recommendations on chemical weapons; and
- Report on measures taken to implement provisions from the Convention, and pledge financial support.

Beyond First Committee, states should:

- Review national measures and policies and make changes or implement new ones to strengthen compliance with CWC; and
- Adopt and enforce necessary legal measures to ensure effective compliance with the Convention, develop national action plans, and share national experiences, challenges and initiatives, to adopt legal measures giving effect to the Convention, and share relevant laws and regulations.

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1 *Yearbook 2018 – Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security—Summary*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/yb_18_summary_en_0.pdf.

2 “Safeguard Chemical Weapons Treaty – Countries Should Set Ways to Identify Users of Banned Weapons,” Human Rights Watch, 19 June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/19/safeguard-chemical-weapons-treaty>.

3 Decision Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use, UN Doc C-SS-4/DEC.3, 27 June 2018, https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-SS-4/en/css4dec3_e_.doc.pdf.

4 See for example Allison Pytlak, “Other weapons of mass destruction”, *First Committee Monitor 2017*, No. 4, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 23 October 2017.

5 See for example Allison Pytlak, “Other weapons of mass destruction”, *First Committee Monitor 2017*, No. 6, Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 6 November 2017.