



Working Together for a World Free of Chemical Weapons, and Beyond

Nobel Lecture, December 10, 2013

by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), delivered by Ahmet Üzümcü.

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highness, Distinguished members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with profound humility that I accept this prize on behalf of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, its Member States, their Ambassadors and Secretariat staff, past and present—some of whom are with us today, including my immediate predecessor, Ambassador Rogelio Pfirter.

This award recognises our combined efforts—efforts which flow from the collective spirit of the OPCW in working towards a common good that serves all humanity. I feel deeply privileged to be able to address you on this occasion.

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The Nobel Committee has a long history of honouring achievement in disarmament. Yet, this is the first time that the Peace Prize has been awarded to an organisation that is actively engaged in disarmament as a practical and ongoing reality.

For sixteen years now, the OPCW has been overseeing the elimination of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction. Our task is to consign chemical weapons to history, forever—a task we have been carrying out with quiet determination, and no small measure of success.

Under the terms of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW has so far verified the destruction of more than 80% of all declared chemical weapons.

We have also implemented a wide range of measures to prevent such weapons from re-emerging. And with 190 states now members of this global ban, we are hastening the vision of a world free of chemical weapons to reality.

The remarkable success of chemical disarmament has borne out the promise made by Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, when he characterised the first meeting of Member States, back in 1997, with the following words:

“It is not merely a great step in the cause of disarmament and non-proliferation. It is not merely a signal of restraint and discipline in war. It is much more. It is a momentous act of peace.”

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

There can be no doubt about the value of this work. For chemical weapons have been used with brutal regularity over the twentieth century—and, tragically, in our own century as well.

No weapon, of course, has a monopoly on cruelty or lethality. But chemical weapons have, by any measure, an especially nefarious legacy.

Almost one hundred years since their first large-scale use on the battlefields of Flanders, it is worth reminding ourselves of the reasons why these weapons invoke such horror, right up to our own time.

Chemical weapons stir the deep-rooted and pathological fear all humans share of being poisoned. They do not discriminate between combatant and civilian, nor between battlefield and village. You cannot see them. You cannot smell them. And they offer no warning for the unsuspecting.

But their effects are devastating—burning, blinding or suffocating their victims. Death is rarely instant and never painless. And when they fail to kill, as they often do, these weapons inflict lasting damage on people and their environment, denying them the opportunity to repair and rebuild in the wake of conflict.

I need not describe these effects in all their gruesome variations. They would defy any description. It is enough to look at the pictures of victims to understand the agony that they must have gone through—from Ieper (Ypres) in Belgium to Sardasht in Iran, from Halabja in Iraq to Ghouta in Syria.

And we only need to look at the fate of the survivors of such attacks—people destined to spend the rest of their lives suffering unbearable physical and psychological pain—to understand why such weapons must be banned.

Chemical weapons evolved over time, with the discovery of new and deadlier agents. But, whatever their form, they share one common purpose—to invoke fear and submission through the horrifying nature of their impact.

Scores of victims beyond the battlefield have attested to this. In accepting this prize on behalf of the OPCW, I also pay homage to all these victims.

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The first attempt to ban the use of chemical weapons under international law was the Hague Convention of 1899.

The fact that this treaty was not observed during the First World War prompted immediate efforts to negotiate a stronger norm. These efforts resulted in the 1925 Geneva Protocol. While it prohibited the use of chemical weapons, the Protocol did not ban their production or possession.

History, alas, did not bear out its robustness. Chemical weapons continued to be used across the globe, including against civilian populations. And, alarmingly, large and more sophisticated arsenals were developed during the Cold War.

It was not until the 1980s that negotiations for a more comprehensive chemical weapons treaty got underway in earnest. Chemical attacks being perpetrated at that time by the former regime in Iraq added to the urgency of this process.

Fortunately, it was not only the brutal effects of chemical weapons that focused minds. What drove the negotiators was also the imperative to ensure the effectiveness of the future norm to ban these weapons.

States were adamant that chemical weapons had to be made a thing of the past—by deeds, not just words. What they strove for was a treaty that all but enforced compliance, coming closer than any predecessor to guaranteeing adherence to its provisions. And, after almost two decades of difficult negotiations, they succeeded.

Their efforts gave birth to the full global ban that came to be known as the Chemical Weapons Convention—and to an entirely independent organisation, the OPCW, to oversee its implementation.

As difficult as the challenges in bilateral arms control have been, concluding this multilateral treaty was, clearly, a singular achievement.

It also stands as a major triumph in the history of multilateralism. Almost eighty years after the first large-scale use of chemical weapons, the collective determination of states was finally able to shine through in comprehensively banning these weapons.

This resolve of the community of nations lays testimony to the very best that can be achieved by multilateralism in the cause of peace and security. As Benjamin Disraeli observed, “Through perseverance, many people win success out of what seemed destined to be certain failure.”

I pay tribute here to all those who, through their dedication and resolve, contributed to this hard-won success for chemical disarmament. And I commend Governments for their courage and foresight in taking this bold step.

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It was out of these negotiations that the crucible of the unique success of the Chemical Weapons Convention was forged—a comprehensive international verification mechanism.

A mechanism that had no prior model and had to be developed from scratch.

A mechanism that obliges every one of the Convention’s 190 Member States, without discrimination, to destroy its chemical weapon stocks and production facilities—and to lay bare, through inspection, any industrial facilities that could be used for purposes prohibited by this treaty.

A mechanism that brooks no exceptions, and can conduct inspections at short notice to investigate alleged use of chemical weapons, or suspicions over banned activities.

In short, a mechanism that places the onus on states to ensure full transparency vis-à-vis their obligations—with the OPCW acting as arbiter and guardian of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

With the entry into force of the Convention in 1997, we have thus been able to cross, and link, the wide space in disarmament between passion and practicality, between sentiment and action, between noble ambition and concrete achievements.

And, for the first time in the history of multilateral diplomacy, we were able to show that consensus-based decision-making can yield practical, effective and, above all, verifiable results in disarmament. From where we stand now, I commend Member States’ commitment to effective implementation of the Convention.

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The Convention’s achievements make the recent chemical attacks in Syria, which shocked us all, even more tragic. For they highlight the manifest security advantages that states adhering to the Convention enjoy. In the sixteen years

that the Convention has been in force, no Member State has experienced an attack with chemical weapons.

Thankfully, the international response to those attacks set in motion an extraordinary series of events. These resulted in Syria's accession to the Convention and a front-line role for the OPCW, working together with the United Nations, to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons.

Never in its history has the OPCW overseen the destruction of such a major chemical weapons stockpile in the midst of a civil war, and in such compressed timeframes. But, as much as this mission is testing our capacities and resources, our progress so far has only strengthened our confidence that we can succeed.

I am immensely proud of those staff members, from the OPCW as well as the UN, who have volunteered to work in Syria in what are extremely challenging circumstances. Their dedication and personal courage do great credit to both organisations.

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

International consensus on the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria has as its basis the same consensus that drove the Chemical Weapons Convention to conclusion. The challenge now is to persuade those six countries still outside the Convention to join it—without delay or conditions.

There has long been no reasonable defence for not doing so—all the more now in the wake of the robust international reaction to recent use of chemical weapons. No national interest can credibly outweigh either the security or economic benefits of adhering to the global chemical ban.

It is my fervent hope that this award will spur on efforts to make the Chemical Weapons Convention a truly universal norm. Universal adherence to the Convention would be the most enduring investment in its integrity—and the best guarantee of its reach.

We cannot allow the tragedy that befell the people of Ghouta to be repeated.

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The durability of the Chemical Weapons Convention owes as much to what followed in the implementation of the treaty as to what was negotiated into it. Key in this regard are the OPCW's active partnerships with science.

These partnerships have in significant measure defined the success of the Convention because of the dual-use nature of what goes into making chemical

weapons. Many of their materials and technologies also have beneficial commercial and industrial applications.

Without a common understanding of where the line must be drawn between what helps us, and what harms us, there can be no effective verification. It is the OPCW's partnerships with science that have drawn this line—in a clear and defensible way.

They have done so by devising tools and methods for defining, detecting and protecting against chemical weapon agents, and monitoring new and emerging technologies of potential concern.

More than this, they have facilitated the sharing of such information between peers. And, crucially, they have opened up a new sort of dialogue that makes the impact of scientific discoveries better understood.

We need to deal with the situation in which, as Isaac Asimov put it, “science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.” It is for this reason that the OPCW has worked hard to enhance awareness of the often fine line between beneficial and harmful applications in chemistry through education programmes and outreach to academia.

Our aim is to contribute to efforts towards fostering a culture of responsible science. This will ensure that current and future generations of scientists understand—and respect—the impact that their work can have on security.

What we are striving to create, together with our partners, is a two-tiered structure for supporting advances in chemistry—one that accommodates a collective early-warning system for scientific discoveries that could be misused, and a global repository for knowledge, expertise and technologies that should benefit all nations.

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Industry has been no less important a partner for the achievement of goals enshrined in the Chemical Weapons Convention. Its concerns were discussed and addressed from the very beginning of the negotiations on the Convention.

Specifically, industry had to have complete confidence in arrangements made for commercial protection. Without such arrangements, there could be no productive collaboration and, therefore, no access to commercial chemical facilities for inspection.

Given the degree to which the Convention's verification requirements are entangled with normal commercial and industrial processes, industry's active participation is vital.

Some 2,500 inspections later, in more than 80 countries, we have shown that the Convention's arrangements work. Our ambition now is to better integrate industry as a partner working to ensure continued and effective implementation of the Convention.

More broadly, this sort of partnership with the private sector points a way forward for many of the non-traditional multilateral challenges we are facing, from climate change to poverty alleviation. It is a key area of focus for the OPCW's efforts to augment the Convention's profile, and adherence to it.

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When the Chemical Weapons Convention was concluded in 1992, it was rightly heralded as the most tangible disarmament outcome of the immediate post-Cold War period. But over the more than two decades since then, we have little else to show in the area of disarmament for the enormous peace dividend that the end of the Cold War brought us.

It is high time to move towards a different, more durable security in keeping with the extraordinary opportunities that globalisation has brought—a security that accommodates human development, economic cooperation and mutual prosperity.

Effective implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention has played a definitive role in empowering a broader community of stakeholders to this end.

Their voices are persuasive because they are pragmatic. They eschew moral argument in favour of facts. And their modes of presentation only enhance their credibility. These include objective assessments of verification methods, innovative cost-benefit analyses of retaining weapons of mass destruction, and frank reviews of the commercial impact of treaty compliance.

Finally, they have been able to give expression to their voices and test their judgements through new habits of dialogue and cooperation between scientists and policy-makers, between industry and academia, and between civil society and government officials.

It is these sorts of habits that the OPCW is committed to fostering.

As a means of preserving the legacy of the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize, I announce here that the prize money awarded by the Nobel Committee will be used to fund annual OPCW awards. These awards will recognise outstanding contributions to advancing the goals of the Convention. I am sure that civil society will continue to play a significant role in this regard.

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For its part, the OPCW will do its utmost to ensure that it remains a highly effective organisation. An organisation that continues to invest in its most valuable asset—a cadre of highly skilled and dedicated people. An organisation that anticipates future challenges. And an organisation that adapts its resources and expertise to be able to respond to them.

Syria has tested us in this regard. Verifying the declaration of a Member State is a routine activity for the OPCW. But there is clearly nothing routine about the circumstances in which we are doing so in that country.

We would welcome the opportunity of new Member States submitting themselves to the verification regime of the Convention.

At the same time, we are looking beyond what we do, to how we do it. Our aim is to build on our sixteen-year record of success by increasing our efficiency and broadening our reach.

This not only means staying abreast of scientific and technological advances that may test our understanding of what constitutes a chemical weapon. It also requires us to ensure that we are making the best possible use of advances in communication, especially publicly available tools.

Having seen how rapidly information can be conveyed by social media and, critically, verified through images, we need to consider how we might harness such tools for our monitoring, verification and investigation activities. This could render particular benefits for our work with Member States to prevent non-state actors from gaining access to dual-use materials and know-how.

And, in our world of globalised trade and supply chains, it could potentially help Member States further improve their ability to track exports of dual-use goods and materials—to ensure that these exports go where they are supposed to go, and are used for purposes they are intended for.

We are also thinking about how we can employ new communication tools to raise awareness of the need to practise responsible science, to instil the highest ethical standards in our future scientists and researchers.

Finally, we are expanding and deepening our interaction with other international organisations.

The United Nations is central in this regard, whether in partnership on the ground in Syria, or in our broader, mutually reinforcing efforts to promote disarmament.

We are likewise engaging regional organisations to use their forums and networks for raising awareness of the goals of the Chemical Weapons Convention, including in helping to secure universality.

Our interaction with other specialised international agencies is identifying areas of overlap that enhance chemical security, ranging from addressing transnational crime and terrorism, to building capacity for chemical emergency response.

And we are working with other arms control treaty organisations to exchange best practices in areas ranging from dual-use challenges to verification methods.

Institutional cooperation is the bedrock of the broader stakeholder engagement on which the OPCW prides itself—cooperation which I hope we can underwrite with increased communication and social networking, stimulating fresh ideas and innovative inputs.

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Your Majesties, Your Royal Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The history of arms control has shown no lack of passion. Yet, when so much is at stake, passion must take care to ground itself in reality, if it is to achieve its ambitions.

This means being pragmatic, clear-minded—even dispassionate—about acquiring the best possible tools for achieving and consolidating disarmament goals. And it often means governments showing the political courage to take tough decisions for the benefit of the community of nations.

The Chemical Weapons Convention has shown that this sort of an approach yields results. For the Convention is more than mere words and promises on a piece of paper. It is a comprehensive regime geared towards ridding the world of chemical weapons, and making sure they never again threaten humankind.

In this regime, Member States provide the will behind the Convention. And it is the OPCW that provides the force for making its goals a reality.

Our work, imbued with resolve and certitude, is the international community's guarantee of the Convention's implementation.

It shows that from lofty dreams we can carve out steps leading us from vision to reality.

It took almost a century to achieve a total ban on chemical weapons. A century over which thousands fell victim to these heinous weapons. A century at whose end we can now look to a future free of the scourge they represent.

No value can be placed on this achievement. And no effort should be spared in sharing the gains it has brought us.

Those of us who have worked towards chemical disarmament recognise that with our success also comes an obligation to broaden it.

The Chemical Weapons Convention has given us a legacy that no future disarmament effort can afford to ignore.

A legacy that has, at its core, verification, broad stakeholder engagement, consensus born of trust and, above all, a commitment to science that actively serves the cause of peace and security.

It is this legacy that we must set as the keystone in an ever-widening arch of disarmament. Only by building such an arch will we be able to bridge our security and our prosperity.

Destiny has ruled that we rid the world of chemical weapons. And that we achieve this in our lifetime.

This is our place in history. And this is the future we are creating.

A future for which our children and grandchildren can be truly thankful.