

UN chemical weapons watchdog adds new powers to assign blame, following attacks

The United Nations chemical weapons watchdog voted in favour of a United Kingdom-led proposal on Wednesday, allocating itself new powers to assign blame for attacks.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW), which is made up of Member States, voted by a margin of 82 in favor and 24 against – “to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic”, where the Fact-Finding Mission in the country has decided that weapons have been used, or are likely to have been used.

Until the vote by States Parties on Wednesday, OPCW could only say whether chemical weapons had been used, but not by whom.

“I have not hesitated in pointing out that currently there is [no mechanism](#) that would ensure that those who use chemical weapons are held fully accountable,” OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü stated at the opening of the Special Session Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

“Investigations of alleged use of chemical weapons are essential if we are to preserve the core norms of the Convention, its credibility, and its integrity,” he added, saying that chemical weapons use is a serious offence requiring resolute action.

According to news reports, the European Union and the United States supported the UK-led move to expand the OPCW's powers, while Iran, Syria and Russia opposed the move as going beyond its mandate.

The UK introduced the motion, after a chemical agent was used to poison a former Russian intelligence officer in the English city of Salisbury, in early March. OPCW inspectors confirmed on 18 April, that a toxic chemical of “high purity” had been used. The UK accused Russia of being the source, but Russia has firmly rejected that charge.

Investigations of alleged use of chemical weapons are essential – *Ahmet Üzümcü, OPCW Director-General*

Wednesday's decision of the OPCW condemned “in the strongest possible terms” the use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances, anywhere, calling it “unacceptable,” and contravening international norms and standards.

Moreover, it condemned the use of chemical weapons since 2012 in Iraq, Malaysia, Syria and the UK, as well as by State and by non-State actors as a “direct threat” to the object and purpose of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

The States Parties also reiterated the role of the OPCW Executive Council on cases of non-compliance and requested the Secretariat preserve and provide information to the General Assembly-established investigative mechanism, as well as to any relevant UN investigatory entities.

“If accountability is avoided, the potential re-emergence and acceptance of chemicals as weapons of war and terror will not be deterred,” stressed Mr. Üzümcü.

As the CWC’s implementing body, the OPCW oversees the global effort to permanently eliminate chemical weapons. Since its 1997 entry into force – with 193 States Parties – it is the most successful disarmament treaty ever, eliminating an entire class of weapons of mass destruction.

[WHO study reveals ‘game-changer’ drug with potential to save thousands of women’s lives in childbirth](#)

A stand-by drug used to prevent potentially-fatal bleeding after childbirth has some new competition – with improved benefits, according a United Nations health agency-led report.

Excessive bleeding after childbirth still kills around 70,000 mothers a year and currently, Oxytocin is the first-choice medication, but it must be kept cold, unlike the new drug, Carbetocin.

The study, partly led, among others, by the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) and published on Wednesday, suggests that the new drug which can be stored at normal temperatures, could save the lives of thousands in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

“This is a truly encouraging new development that can revolutionize our ability to keep mothers and babies alive,” said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Since Oxytocin must be stored and transported at a cool two to eight degrees Celsius – a difficult task in many countries – numerous women lack access to the medicine. And if they can obtain it, heat exposure may render the drug less effective.

The study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, has shown the heat-stable Carbetocin is not only as safe and effective as Oxytocin, but even without refrigeration – when stored at below 30 degrees Celsius and 75 per cent relative humidity – it retains its efficacy for at least three years.

Clinical trial

WHO notes that approximately 70,000 women die annually from postpartum haemorrhage – increasing the risk that their babies will also die within a month.

In the largest clinical trial of its kind, close to 30,000 women who gave birth vaginally were studied in Argentina, Egypt, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda and the United Kingdom.

Immediately after child birth, each woman was randomly injected with a single dose of either heat-stable Carbetocin or Oxytocin – revealing that both were equally effective at preventing excessive bleeding.

“The development of a drug to prevent postpartum hemorrhage that continues to remain effective in hot and humid conditions is very good news for the millions of women who give birth in parts of the world without access to reliable refrigeration,” said Metin Gülmezoglu of WHO’s Department of Reproductive Health and Research.

While Carbetocin has not yet been cleared for use beyond clinical trials, the next steps begin with a regulatory review, countries’ approval and then consideration by WHO’s Guideline Development Group.

However, the UN health agency said on Wednesday, that following the positive trial results, it will be working to advance affordable access to the potentially lifesaving drug in countries with a high maternal death rate.

Opponents of constitutional change in Burundi face torture and execution: UN investigators

In Burundi, opponents of constitutional reform supported by the Government have faced torture and execution amid a “continuing environment of threats and intimidation”, senior UN investigators said on Wednesday.

Reporting to the [Human Rights Council](#), the [Commission of Inquiry](#) on Burundi delivered its findings based on more than 380 interviews, in addition to 500

testimonies collected last year.

The dossier compiled by the three-member panel encompasses events surrounding the national referendum last month on constitutional reform which could extend President Pierre Nkurunziza's term in office well beyond 2020.

Noting a presidential declaration made in support of his successor after the referendum, the report reiterates the view of some observers that Mr. Nkurunziza's comments were "by no means a clear and firm commitment not to run" in future elections himself.

It also notes "difficulties" faced by international media outlets in covering events in the country amid the suspension of broadcasters including the BBC and Voice of America, following reports that were deemed "biased" by Burundian authorities.

On the alleged rights violations committed in the country, the report highlights "numerous arrests" of people who called for a "no" vote in the referendum, including members of opposition parties who were then allegedly executed or abducted.

It states that "unidentified bodies" have continued to be found "in various parts of the country" after their arrest by "individuals in police uniform" or National Intelligence Service (SNR) agents.

Victims were also targeted by the Imbonerakure – the youth wing aligned to the ruling CNDD-FDD party – whose influence is said to have risen "in the repressive machinery which has developed since 2015".

Describing how the Imbonerakure "cover the country", the Commission of Inquiry's findings detail how their members inform the authorities about "real or perceived opponents in each locality", all the while "harassing, controlling or intimidating the population", with the approval of State officials.

This collaboration extends to putting pressure on people to collect contributions for elections in 2020, the report states, before detailing how civil servants are required to pay the equivalent of 10 per cent "or more" of their salary to an election fund.

This levy extends to households and others above voting age on an "ad hoc basis at the local level", the report continues, citing eyewitness reports of "roadblocks set up throughout the country" by the Imbonerakure to check whether people had receipts for the tax.

Such developments have contributed to the "continuing deterioration" of the Burundian economy that has left the country's people among the very poorest in the world, according to per capita earnings, the report continues.

Referencing the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#), it states that 3.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Burundi today.

The deteriorating economic situation will be included in the Commission of Inquiry's final report to the Human Rights Council in September.

[New book honours UN women who made HERstory](#)

Raising awareness of women's contributions is critical to correcting historical imbalances that have undervalued their presence, the United Nations Secretary-General said on Wednesday.

António Guterres was speaking at an event at UN Headquarters in New York to launch a book that pays tribute to women's participation in the development of the global organization.

HERstory: Celebrating Women Leaders in the United Nations is an initiative by Colombia and Qatar, and builds on an exhibition held two years ago.

The initiative shines a spotlight on pioneers and trailblazers such as Lucille M. Mair, the first woman to serve at the rank of Under-Secretary-General: the title given to officials who oversee UN Departments; and Margaret Anstee, who was the first woman to head a peacekeeping operation.

"The history we learn at school, that is celebrated in public monuments and events, tends to be a very partial history. It is the history of men," Mr. Guterres said.

"Raising awareness of women's contributions is an essential part of correcting the imbalance in our culture that has historically undervalued women's contributions and women's work."

Mr. Guterres reminded the audience of the "enormous progress" in women's rights achieved during more than seven decades since the founding of the UN.

But he also recalled that women comprised just six of the 278 delegates at the 1945 conference that established the Organization: a story told in a recent UN News podcast, which you can listen to [here](#).

And while such paltry participation could not happen today, the UN chief reported that practically every week he still encounters diplomatic delegations that do not include a single woman.

The issue is also a concern in-house, Mr. Guterres said, adding that the UN has had to work at ensuring its own events do not feature "manels"—that is, all-male panels.

The Secretary-General has made gender parity a top priority, pushing for

greater women's representation at the UN, including at the senior management level.

"This is not simply about the fight for gender equality," he stated. "From peace and security to development to human rights, greater inclusion is the key to our success – bringing new perspectives, different leadership styles, greater innovation and, ultimately, a more effective organization."

[We must stop a devastating 'battle-to-the-end' in southwest Syria, declares UN envoy](#)

A "full-scale" ground and aerial offensive in southwest Syria could inflict an even heavier toll on civilians than the suffering caused by previous devastating battles in the war-ravaged country, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria has warned.

"Let us be aware of what this would mean, if the southwest sees a full-scale battle-to-the-end: it could be like eastern Aleppo and eastern Ghouta combined together," Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, told the Security Council on Wednesday.

"We ... cannot allow ... this to become another Ghouta, another Douma, or another Aleppo, where so many civilians were sacrificed and died. And yet I see things moving in this direction," he said.

Speaking via video link from Geneva, Mr. de Mistura also cautioned that such fighting could increase tensions across the region and risk compromising momentum in political talks to reach a lasting peace deal.

In his briefing, Mr. de Mistura told Council members that intensified efforts were on-going "to find a way ahead" for the implementation of a deal and for the establishment of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated committee on a new constitution, within the framework of the Geneva process and in accordance with Security Council [resolution 2254](#).

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– UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura

"I will continue on my side to facilitate further movement in this direction to seek the support, counsel and advice of many – which is why I anticipate inviting the Sochi co-convenors back to Geneva in the coming weeks ... and

then, of course, report to you, to the Security Council,” he said.

Concluding his briefing, the UN Special Envoy urged the Security Council as well as the Syrian Government to support efforts on the political front to put Syrians themselves in charge of their own future, because “no country or no organization can simply impose a fait accompli on the Syrian people.”

He also called on all parties to the conflict and on those who have influence over them to help find a solution that will “spare civilian suffering”, prevent more people from being displaced, and “reduce potential tensions.”

Worsening fighting could jeopardize aid efforts – UN relief official

Also briefing the 15-member Council, John Ging, the Director of Operations at the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), detailed the humanitarian consequences of the fighting in the southwestern Governorate of Dara’a, saying that to date, an estimated 45,000 to 50,000 people have been displaced due to hostilities.

The number, he added “[could nearly double](#)” if fighting continues to escalate, and most hospitals and medical facilities there have already closed, he told Council Members.

UN cross-border relief operations from Jordan, bringing much needed aid to hundreds of thousands in need across southern Syria, could also be jeopardized if violence worsens, said Mr. Ging.

“I call on all stakeholders to ensure that cross-border humanitarian deliveries continue in a sustained, safe and unimpeded manner to reach all those in need, including the newly displaced people,” said the senior OCHA official.