

Efforts to discover those responsible for chemical weapons use in Syria at a standstill, Security Council told

A senior United Nations official on Wednesday stressed the need for an independent investigation to determine who used chemical weapons in Syria, and called on the Security Council to show unity to not let the perpetrators get away with it.

“The persistent allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria underscore the need to identify solutions and reach agreement on [an appropriate accountability mechanism](#),” Thomas Markram, Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, told the 15-member body, which last year [failed](#) to renew an international panel investigating use of chemical weapons in that country.

The Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and UN was created in 2015 by the Council, but its mandate expired in November 2017.

“While allegations of the use of chemical weapons have not stopped, consideration of a mechanism for accountability has apparently slowed, if not come to a standstill,” said Mr. Markram, who addressed the Council on behalf of High Representative Izumi Nakamitsu.

Today, which marked one year since the tragic use of chemical weapons – the deadly nerve agent sarin – in Khan Shaykhun, is a fitting date to remember the victims of this attack, he added.

On the issue of chemical weapons production sites declared by Syria, Mr. Markram said that destruction of the two remaining facilities will be verified by the OPCW and is expected to be completed within two to three months from the start of destruction.

As for the allegations of the use of chemical weapons that were brought to the attention by the Syrian Government, the OPCW fact-finding mission is currently in Damascus to determine if such weapons were used. The mission, however, is not mandated to determine who used them.

United States Ambassador Nikki Haley said that “the Assad regime continued using chemical weapons against the Syrian people. One member of this Council shielded the Assad regime from any consequences, then blocked us from renewing the Joint Investigative Mechanism.”

Her Russian counterpart Vassily Nebenzia said that while some Western countries are chasing “the phantom chemical weapons” of Damascus, the dangerous potential of chemical terrorism continues to accumulate in the region. He added that Western countries insist on recreating a JIM which

would rubber-stamp the decisions that they need and that his delegation has proposed an alternative to the former JIM and circulated a draft resolution.

Results of tests of samples from Salisbury expected next week – chemical weapons watchdog

Results of tests of samples collected from individuals exposed to a nerve agent in Salisbury, the United Kingdom, are expected to be received by early next week, the head of the United Nations-backed body working to rid the world of chemical weapons said on Wednesday.

“Once the results of the analyses of the samples are received, the Secretariat will produce a report on the basis of these results and will transmit a copy of this report to the United Kingdom,” Ahmet Üzümcü, the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)), told the body’s Executive Council.

“The UK has expressed its wish to be as transparent as possible and has already indicated its preference for disclosure of the report to other States Parties,” he added.

The samples were collected from Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, who have been hospitalized since when they were found on a public bench in the English city of Salisbury in early March, after reported exposure to a toxic chemical.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, the UK said that it was “highly likely” that Russia was behind the incident using a deadly nerve-agent. The accusations were met by a firm denial by Russia, which as a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention ([CWC](#)), requested today’s Executive Council [meeting](#).

According to OPCW, samples were also collected from a third individual – a police official – reportedly exposed to the chemical.

The samples were sealed and brought to the OPCW laboratory on 23 March.

An OPCW expert team was deployed to the UK at the country’s request seeking technical assistance in identifying the nature of the toxic chemical reportedly used.

In his update, Mr. Üzümcü also said that OPCW team worked independently and in not involved in the national investigation by the UK authorities and that

no State Party is involved in the technical work that is being carried out by the Secretariat.

The OPCW is the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which came into force in 1997 and outlaws the production, stockpiling, and use of [chemical weapons](#) and their [precursors](#).

[Mass evacuations from Syria's war-ravaged cities 'desperate measures in desperate times,' says senior UN adviser](#)

In Syria, the mass evacuation of civilians is threatening to leave aid workers "overrun" and "acutely underfunded," as details emerge of the unparalleled destruction in urban areas like the former ISIL-held city of Raqqa, UN senior adviser Jan Egeland said on Wednesday.

"This is the very [wrong time to turn our back on civilians](#)," he told journalists in Geneva, highlighting that aid projects in Syria are now less than eight per cent funded.

Mr. Egeland, who had earlier attended a scheduled meeting of the UN-supported humanitarian task force on Syria, said that more than half a million men, women and children had been displaced in the last three months in and around Idlib, from Eastern Ghouta, and from the district of Afrin in northern Aleppo.

He described mass evacuations of civilians as "desperate measures in desperate times" adding that they had played their part in ending battles in urban areas in Syria.

But they have also contributed to a desperate humanitarian situation.

In Idlib Province alone, some 1.5 million people were now displaced in various locations, making it "the biggest refugee camp on earth in many ways," said Mr. Egeland, who is the Senior Advisor to UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura.

Mr. Egeland also provided details about the destruction of Raqqa city, once the stronghold of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) extremists, saying that it was even worse than in Aleppo and Homs, two other once-vibrant Syrian cities that have seen massive destruction over the course of the seven-year conflict.

On the final push for Eastern Ghouta, just outside the Syrian capital, Mr. Egeland said that there had been “no recent reports of fighting and air raids” and “hopefully the battle is over now in the heavily populated areas.”

Until recently more than 400,000 people had been besieged for years in parts of Eastern Ghouta.

The area has been subject to a Government-backed offensive launched in mid-February and now only 130,000 people still live there, Mr. Egeland said.

Of that number, around 80,000 have gone to shelters in Government-held areas of Rural Damascus and one-third have left voluntarily – an important indicator of freedom of movement, the humanitarian official added.

Referring to “ongoing negotiations” between the Syrian government and armed groups over the evacuation of those left in opposition-held locations of Eastern Ghouta, Mr Egeland said he hoped that people would be allowed to stay if they wished.

He also called for an amnesty “for those who put away arms”.

In Raqqa city in northern Syria, Mr. Egeland said that 100,000 people had returned there to live, and the same number were outside the city hoping to return home.

What awaits them is almost total devastation, he added, citing a new report compiled by 25 UN experts used to working in conflict situations but who were nonetheless shocked by the destruction they encountered.

Homes were “still full of bombs” and children were “still being maimed and killed,” according to Mr. Egeland, who also highlighted that there is only one hospital in Raqqa and almost no public services.

Australia-bound asylum-seekers left mentally scarred by years of detention on Pacific islands, warns UN refugee official

A senior UN refugee agency official warned on Wednesday about the “shocking” effects of long-term detention on Australia-bound asylum-seekers who are being held on remote Pacific islands.

Indrika Ratwatte said the situation in Nauru, as well and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, was as bad as he had seen in his 25-year career.

Both locations have been used to house more than 3,000 men, women and children from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, since Australia implemented its offshore processing policy in 2013.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva after returning from Nauru last week, Mr. Ratwatte, who heads the Asia and Pacific bureau of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), described the “shocking” psychological and the mental toll on refugees and asylum seekers.

Children have been particularly affected, he said:

“I have seen a little girl for example who was 12 years old in a catatonic state who has not stepped out of her room in a month [...] clinical psychiatrists and professionals have determined that around 80 per cent of the asylum-seekers and refugees in Nauru and Manus as well are suffering from post-traumatic stress and depression. This is per capita one of the highest mental health problems levels that have been noted.”

Despite the clear need to address the problem, the lack of psychiatric help and healthcare “has increased the sense of hopelessness and despair,” Mr. Ratwatte said.

“The point here is also that Australia has had a long tradition of supporting refugee and humanitarian programmes globally, but on this one, the offshore processing policy has had an extremely detrimental impact on refugees and asylum-seekers.”

He urged Australia to continue to support the authorities on Nauru once it hands over responsibility to the island for medical and psychiatric services.

There are currently around 2,000 detainees on the islands.

Around 40 children born in Nauru have seen “nothing but detention-like conditions,” Mr. Ratwatte said, and another 50 youngsters have spent more than half their lives there.

Under a deal agreed between Australia and the United States, some 1,000 detainees from Nauru will be repatriated to the US. Around 180 have already left the island.

Welcoming the agreement, the UNHCR official said that this would still leave the same number of people on Nauru, and he urged the Australian Government to consider an offer from New Zealand to rehouse them.

“It is a very genuine offer and New Zealand has an excellent programme for refugee settlement,” Mr. Ratwatte said.

Continuing hostilities greatest challenge for South Sudan, says UN relief official

With the next phase of regionally-backed peace talks for South Sudan scheduled for later this month, a senior United Nations aid official in the country has urged the parties involved to find a political compromise and allow peace to take hold in the strife-ridden country.

Speaking to *UN News*, Alain Noudehou, the Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, underscored that continuing hostilities remain the greatest challenge.

“People don’t feel secure [...] they are not able to go back to their lands and they are not able to produce. They need to feel secure, not only in sense of physical protection but actually in the sense that they can go back to their lives,” he explained.

The world’s youngest country, South Sudan, gained independence in 2011.

However, it spent much of its short life mired in conflict, as what began as a political face-off between President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Riek Machar erupted into full-blown war late in 2013.

In December last year, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an eight-country trade bloc in Africa, facilitated an [agreement](#) between the Government and opposing groups. The first phase of talks, formally called the High-Level Revitalisation Forum, was held in February this year.

In spite of the recent progress, close to two million people remain displaced within South Sudan and a further 2.5 million took refuge in neighbouring countries.

With women and children making up close to 85 per cent of the total, ensuring their inclusion and participation in the peace process is vital, stressed Mr. Noudehou, who is also the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for South Sudan.



UNMISS/Denis Louro

A woman paints a mural on a wall in Yei, South Sudan. As a part of a collective effort, the group of painters painted a number of pictures and messages on peace and harmony at many locations in the town.

Women's participation vital to securing peace

Mr. Noudehou stressed that the participation of women is critical for durable and effective peace.

"If they are not a part of the dialogue of peace-making, we will be missing a tremendous perspective of what it's going to take to make the peace much more lasting in [the country]," he added, noting that women's participation is vital in not only defining the peace agreement but also in implementing it.

"They understand the plight of the women [because] they have been there and can contribute to a solution that is durable and is effective," added the senior UN official.

The conflict and instability in South Sudan also led to a devastating famine last year, leaving over 7 million of its people dependent on humanitarian and protection assistance.

Across the country, 5.3 million people (48 per cent of the population) are estimated to be facing Crisis and Emergency – the highest levels – of [food insecurity](#) according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.

Compared with the same period last year, this is a 40 per cent increase in the population facing severe food insecurity in the post-harvest season.



UNMISS Photo

Alain Noudehou (left), the Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, speaks at the launch of the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan for the country. Alongside him is Hussein Marnyot, the Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management of South Sudan.

A ‘catastrophic situation’ can be avoided

However, with coordinated action, a “catastrophic situation” can be avoided, said Mr. Noudehou.

“We are planning a multi-sectoral approach to provide the assistance. We are not talking about only about food assistance; but the whole gamut of a system that goes together with it.”

Alongside the [humanitarian effort](#), full and sustained support and funding is equally important. And the resources are needed now, he said, noting that this will enable supplies to be pre-positioned and unnecessary costs avoided.

“If we start to act now and receive the funding now, we will be able to serve more people and do it cheaply,” he said.

With full funding, the \$1.76 billion [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) for South Sudan will provide assistance to some 6 million people across the country. In all, 167 aid organizations, including 11 UN agencies, 61 international non-governmental organizations and 95 national non-governmental organizations are part of the response.