

No impunity for chemical weapons attacks in Syria

The Director-General of the OPCW, Fernando Arias and the Coordinator of the Investigation and Identification Team, Santiago Onate today briefed members of the Security Council on the first report of the IIT into chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Ambassador Jonathan Allen:

Thank you Mr President, and thank you also to Under-Secretary-General Izumi, for her briefing. It's been extremely helpful to hear direct from Director-General Arias and IIT Coordinator Onate and I want to thank them for their work. I know colleagues have quite sensitive questions, which is of course why we are in a more confidential setting.

Colleagues, as many of us have said, it is vital that investigations into serious allegations such as the use of chemical weapons can stand up to scrutiny. And I therefore very much welcome the meticulous and authoritative nature of the IIT report. It relies on a totality of evidence in combination. It is consistent. It makes efforts to corroborate information with multiple sources. Coordinator Onate has been clear that there was a careful consideration of alternative hypotheses, an appeal to a number of countries to give any evidence that they had, and they used expert analyses to reach conclusions. Mr President, the findings, those clear conclusions, are that units of the Syrian Air Force were responsible for three chemical weapons attacks in Ltamenah in Syria in March 2017. And that adds to the facts collected by two separate previous investigations mandated by this council, which also found that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own people on at least four separate occasions.

In Security Council Resolution 2118, this council expressed its strong conviction that those individuals responsible for the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic should be held accountable. And in November, colleagues, we reaffirmed that strong conviction and we reiterated any use of chemical weapons was a grave threat to international peace and security. So in light of the findings of the IIT, the Security Council faces a challenge. How does the Security Council uphold its decisions? How does it act decisively to hold Syria accountable for its clearly evidenced use of chemical weapons on multiple occasions? If we do not, colleagues, we will be seen to condone, or at least to be indifferent to, impunity for the use of such weapons, as well as impunity and failure to comply with Council decisions. As others have said, there is an urgent need to hold accountable all those who have used chemical weapons in violation of international law.

It is imperative that the Security Council shows leadership in demonstrating that impunity – and the use of these weapons – will not be tolerated. By

using these terrible weapons; by retaining a chemical weapons capability that we hear about month after month, inconsistent with both its initial declaration and its alleged full destruction of its program in 2014; by failing to comply fully with the OPCW, Syria remains in breach of its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and Security Council decisions set out in Resolution 2118.

So we should now take forward discussion on how to address this issue and, more importantly, how to ensure that Syria fulfils its obligations under Security Council Resolution 2118 to declare and destroy all its chemical weapons and to cease all further use of chemical weapons. The necessity for this council to act does not depend on action being taken first in The Hague.

Let me say a couple of words on politicisation, because a number of colleagues have talked about this and have referenced the need, for example, to take the politics out of the situation. First of all, I want to thank the Estonian presidency for calling this meeting and enabling this frank discussion. We went to some lengths, as colleagues know from the various conversations that we had, to try and find a formula that would work for all. And we are disappointed that some Council members have chosen not to attend or take part in this discussion.

When we talk about politicisation, we are talking about the Syrian regime, which has used chemical weapons on its people a number of times; which has made only a partial declaration of its chemical weapons holdings; which has failed to answer fully and adequately the questions posed to it by the OPCW on a monthly basis.

And we're talking about, I'm afraid, a set of protectors in the form of the Russian Federation who have over the years used a series of incoherent and incompatible reasons to explain away what has happened.

I have sat in this council over the last three years and I have listened to a number of Russian interventions, and in terms of chemical weapons use in Syria I have heard the Russians, first of all, deny that anything happened at all, that there was no attack.

They then denied that the Syrian regime was responsible for the attack; they said it didn't happen.

They then said that the attacks did happen, but they were carried out by terrorists.

Then they said the attacks didn't happen after all, they were, in fact, staged and they blamed the White Helmets.

The Russian Federation has claimed that Russian and Syrian forces mistakenly hit a chemical weapons dump owned by terrorists, inadvertently releasing chemicals.

They've claimed that a chemical weapons attack was staged by unknown agents as a pretext for Western military aggression. And they've also claimed that the West carried out chemical weapons attacks through proxies on the ground

in Syria.

They've obviously questioned throughout the independence of any investigative mechanism established by this Council which has produced conclusions which they have disagreed with.

They've questioned the independence of the IIT.

They've questioned the credibility and impartiality of the IIT and the OPCW. They hold in question the most important global body that we have in dealing with chemical weapons.

So when DG Arias talks about efforts to undermine the OPCW, that is what I have in my mind.

Those are the arguments the Russian Federation has made. For our part, we follow just one path. From the moment we saw the incontrovertible evidence of the use of chemical weapons, we have called for the establishment of independent mechanisms to find the truth. And the truth that has been found by all of those independent mechanism, is that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons.

Colleagues, the United Kingdom's focus will remain resolutely on upholding the norm against chemical weapons use and pursuing accountability for those who seek to undermine that norm.