

Speech: British Ambassador to Russia briefing on the Salisbury attack: 22 March 2017

Thank you very much for coming along to attend today's briefing.

And, like I think many people in this room, we were all represented, I hope, at yesterday's briefing in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Skripal incident. I was not there. That was a decision on our side that it would not be appropriate for me to attend. I do though know from the member of my team who did attend what sort of event it was; including a rather unpleasant barrage in some cases of personal insults and disinformation.

What we would like to do, what I would like to do today, is to set out some of the facts as we see them and to answer any questions or comments that you might wish to make.

So to start with the facts. There was an attempted murder in Salisbury a couple of weeks ago of 2 individuals, Sergei and Yulia Skripal, using a nerve agent of a type that we know was developed in the Soviet Union, kept by the Russian Federation, and not declared under the [Chemical Weapons Convention](#) as the Russian Federation was obliged to do.

We [asked for an explanation](#) of the Russian Federation as to how this had come about. That explanation was not given and then events took their course. We [announced a number of measures](#) that we would take including the expulsion of 23 undeclared intelligence officers from the United Kingdom working in the Russian embassy, and as you know 23 of my staff will be leaving this embassy later this week as required by the Russian Federation.

So I'll set out a timeline of events and then say a bit about why we think the evidence points towards Russian involvement in this attack and also about what the UK is doing in a bit more detail.

So first the timeline. On the 4th of March Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found on a park bench in Salisbury, they were slipping out of consciousness. They were taken to a hospital by our emergency services. They are still in hospital. They remain in a very very serious condition.

When we established that a nerve agent had been used we immediately informed the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that chemical weapons had been used in the United Kingdom.

Four days later the analysts at Porton Down, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory in the UK, established and made clear that this was a military-grade chemical weapon. One of the Novichok series; a nerve agent as I said produced in Russia. Porton Down is an Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons accredited and designated laboratory.

On the basis of the information we had, we concluded that there were only 2 plausible explanations for how this material had been used in the United Kingdom. Either it was a direct act by the Russian state against our country or the Russian government had lost control of this catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

We summoned the Russian ambassador to account for the use of a Russian military-grade nerve agent on the 12 of March, giving Russia until the end of the following day to provide an account of what had happened. There was then no credible explanation or response from the Russian government. So our [Prime Minister set out the UK's response](#). On the 18th of March Russia announced its retaliation.

I'll now set out why we've concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

First, there is no doubt that the weapon used in the attack was the military-grade nerve agent from the Novichok series. This has been confirmed by specialists, our specialists. An [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons mission is in the UK](#) now to independently confirm this analysis.

There is also no doubt that Novichok was produced in Russia by the Russian state. It is not a weapon that can be manufactured by non-state actors. It is so dangerous it requires the highest grade state laboratories and expertise to produce it.

The existence of the Novichok programme has been confirmed by a number of scientists who worked on the programme of the time. The Russian scientist Vil Mirzayanov has testified that Novichoks were developed as part of the Soviet Union's offensive chemical warfare programme and inherited by the Russian Federation. Vladimir Gutenev, a Duma member and member of Russia's Commission for Chemical Disarmament has confirmed that the Novichok programme existed. Yesterday, Vladimir Uglev, a scientist who worked on the programme in the 1970s and 1980s, confirmed that the Soviet Union developed hundreds of new generation Novichok-group nerve agents.

We also have other information that supports that conclusion. The Foreign Secretary made clear on Sunday, last Sunday, that we have information indicating that within the last decade Russia has investigated ways of delivering nerve agents likely for assassination purposes. Part of this programme has involved producing quantities of Novichok agents.

Russia's claims that Novichok could have been produced elsewhere have no credibility. We have no information to indicate that this agent could have been produced anywhere else except in Russia. So we have no doubt that the nerve agent was produced in Russia.

With that in mind we asked the Russian government to explain how it came to be used in the UK. As I said, Russia offered no explanation and yesterday's briefing demonstrated Russia has instead offered disinformation, distraction and accusations. We have, as of yesterday, counted over 30 lines of disinformation which go back to the Russian state – which include the

possibility that the United Kingdom did it, Ukraine was responsible, the materials were made in Sweden, or that it was Skripal's mother-in-law who attempted to kill him.

Russia has therefore offered no explanation of how this agent came to be used in the UK, and has offered no explanation either as to why Russia has an undeclared chemical weapons programme in contravention of international law.

I should just remind you that under the Chemical Weapons Convention all signatories to the Convention are required to declare all capabilities that go back to 1946. Russia is the successor state of the Soviet Union and therefore is obliged to declare that capability. It has not done so.

We also know that an assassination attempt of this kind is consistent with Russian state behaviour in recent years. Russia has a record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations in Russia and overseas, including in 2006 the assassination of Litvinenko using the radioactive substance Polonium-210. We also know from public statements by Russian officials that Russia views defectors as legitimate targets for assassination.

So the fact that the Novichok was produced in Russia, the fact that Russia has a history of state-sponsored assassinations, and the fact that Russia has responded with the usual playbook of disinformation and denial left us with no choice but to conclude that this amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom.

This is the first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since the Second World War and is a violation of the fundamental prohibition on the use of chemical weapons – [Article 1 of the Chemical Weapons Convention](#). Since the attack Russia has attempted to undermine the UK's position, accusing us of not following the OPCW conventions and refusing to provide any evidence. These accusations are designed to confuse and to weaken our resolve and that of the international community.

All of the UK's actions have been fully consistent with our obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. There is for example no provision in the Chemical Weapons Convention that requires the UK to share samples with Russia of the agent that was used in Salisbury. Russia's history in other spheres, in particular for us the Litvinenko case, makes it entirely clear that we have no reason to work with or to trust the Russian state to provide credible or independent analysis on issues where its interests might be affected.

As I said earlier we are facilitating independent analysis of the material used in Salisbury. An [OPCW team arrived at our request](#) in the United Kingdom on the 19 of March. They are meeting officials from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down and the police to discuss how to collect samples. These samples will then be sent to 2 highly reputable international laboratories selected by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for testing, and we expect to see the results in the next couple of weeks.

At the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday Russia said it would not respect the conclusions of that independent OPCW analysis. Russia has also claimed that the UK has not followed its legal obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, especially [Article 9](#). This is simply not true. The Chemical Weapons Convention makes clear that the UK has the right to lead our own response, engaging the OPCW and others as appropriate. The 10-day window for consultations Russia refers to is a right, our right, not an obligation. Article 9 contains nothing prohibiting states from seeking a rapid response to their immediate and urgent concerns from another state party, which is exactly what we did on the 12 of March when we asked Russia to account for what had happened.

Novichok is a horrific weapon. It is a weapon of war. It was used with tragic consequences for Sergei Skripal and his daughter. It also affected a policeman, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, who was one of the first to respond to the incident, and it affected a large number of UK citizens. 51 people have been assessed or treated in hospital. 131 civilians have been put in potential contact with this nerve agent.

The events on the next slide I think need no explanation. They are about a pattern of behaviour specifically on chemical weapons. Russia has blocked action against President Asad's use of chemical weapons in Syria, including multiple vetoes of Security Council resolutions designed to bring that use to account – following particularly the attack using sarin gas on Khan Sheikhoun in 2017. This undermines the international non-proliferation regime on which all countries, including Russia, depend for their security.

I'll say a few words now about the UK response. As you know we have expelled a number of Russian diplomats. There has been a Russian response.

The underlying point though here is that we were compelled to move to protect our national security in this case. We have dismantled the network of Russian undeclared intelligence operatives working out of the diplomatic mission in the UK. We have enhanced border controls and we are tackling criminality and corruption by individuals linked to the Russian state in the UK. We of course have further options if we need them. But our chief aim as I said is to protect our national security.

Finally, before I throw the floor open to questions I'd like to thank all of our partners for the solidarity in recent weeks. Russia's modus operandi here is to divide, confuse and sow the seeds of doubt. Your support in the coming months in taking action to protect everybody's security, the global security regime, will be essential to demonstrate that Russia must be held to account for what has happened here.

As my [Prime Minister made very clear in Parliament](#) last week, this is a dispute between governments, not between the peoples of our countries. A very large part of what my embassy is here to do and will continue doing is to develop mutually beneficial relations with Russia in all the areas that have been so successful over the last 25 years. Trade, education, people-to-people links, science and technology links. That remains as important today as we go forward as it has ever been. Thank you.