

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.

[Liz Truss kick-starts trade negotiations with Japan](#)

The UK has today (Wednesday 13 May) published its negotiating objectives for a free trade agreement with Japan, with talks beginning shortly.

The agreement will be based on the existing EU-Japan free trade agreement and will aim to secure additional benefits for UK businesses trading with Japan.

More trade is essential in helping the UK overcome the unprecedented economic challenge posed by coronavirus.

We're optimistic that an agreement with Japan can give us security at home and opportunities abroad. It would help improve the resilience of our supply chains through diversity and opening new markets for business, bringing investment, better jobs, higher wages and lower prices, at a time when we need them most.

Manufacturers of textiles and clothing, and professional and financial services providers are among the UK industries expected to be the biggest winners of lowering trade barriers with Japan.

A deal will aim to secure cutting edge provisions on digital trade that in turn maximise trading opportunities across all sectors of the economy, building trust and stability for UK businesses, entrepreneurs and exporters.

These additional provisions, as well as strong copyright provisions, would benefit innovative sectors such as e-commerce and the creative industries. They would also make it easier for the 8,000 small and medium sized businesses exporting goods to Japan.

Government analysis published today shows that the UK economy could benefit from a £1.5 billion boost, as a UK-Japan trade deal could increase trade flows between both countries by £15.2 billion.

UK exporters would benefit from zero or lower tariffs, creating potential savings worth around £33 million per year, while UK workers' wages are expected to increase by £800 million in the long run as a result of the deal.

The agreement would benefit the whole of the United Kingdom, with Scotland, the East Midlands and London expected to benefit the most.

The first round of talks will start shortly using video conferencing, with negotiations continuing to take place remotely until it is safe to travel.

UK-Japan trade talks are also the first logical step towards our joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), helping diversify UK trade and provide opportunities in the world's fastest growing economies.

The government will set out its negotiating objectives for Australia and New Zealand shortly with the aim of having 80 percent of total UK external trade with countries covered by free trade agreements by 2022.

International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss said:

Japan is one of our largest trading partners and a new trade deal will help to increase trade, boost investment and create more jobs following the economic challenges caused by coronavirus.

Both sides are committed to an ambitious timeline to secure a deal that goes even further than the existing agreement especially in digital and data.

Negotiations with Japan are an important step in CPTPP accession, a key UK priority, which will help us diversify our trade and grow the economy".

The UK's overall negotiating objectives for a UK-Japan FTA are:

- Agree an ambitious and comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with

Japan that builds on the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), and secures additional benefits for UK businesses.

- Increase UK GDP and provide new opportunities for UK businesses, including Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and investors, and facilitating greater choice and lower prices for UK producers and consumers.
- Increase the resilience of our supply chains and the security of our whole economy by diversifying our supply chains.
- The Government has been clear that when we are negotiating trade agreements, the National Health Service (NHS) will not be on the table. The price the NHS pays for drugs will not be on the table. The services the NHS provides will not be on the table. The NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector, whether overseas or domestic.
- Throughout the agreement, ensure high standards and protections for UK consumers and workers and build on our existing international obligations. This will include not compromising on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards, and ensure both parties meet their commitments on climate change.
- Secure an agreement which works for the whole of the UK and takes appropriate consideration of the UK's constitutional arrangements and obligations.

[Housing Secretary sets out plan to re-start housing market](#)

- Housing Secretary announces plan to enable people to move home safely and to re-start the housing market in line with social distancing advice
- Estate agents' offices can open; viewings are permitted; show homes can open; removal companies and the other essential parts of the sales and letting process are re-started with immediate effect.
- More than 450,000 buyers and renters have been unable to progress their plans to move since March.
- New guidance to allow extended working hours on construction sites and to make the planning system operate remotely again.
- A 'Safe Working Charter' launched by the Government and the Home Builders Federation, enabling home builders to return to work safely.

From today anyone in England can move home if they follow new guidance published by Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick.

Since lockdown restrictions were implemented in March, more than 450,000 people have been unable to progress their plans to move house. All buyers and renters will now be able to complete purchases and view properties in person, while estate agents, conveyancers and removals firms can return to work while

following social distancing guidelines.

In another move to unlock the housing market, the Housing Secretary has announced a series of measures to get the country building homes for the future, including:

- Allowing builders to agree more flexible construction site working hours with their local council, such as staggering builders' arrival times, easing pressure on public transport;
- Enabling local councils and developers to publicise planning applications through social media instead of having to rely on posters and leaflets, helping to unblock the service; and
- Support for smaller developers by allowing them to defer payments to local councils, helping those struggling with their cash flow while ensuring communities still receive funding towards local infrastructure in the longer term.

A new Charter has also been launched by the Government and the Home Builders Federation, helping construction sites reopen in line with latest health and safety guidance.

Housing Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Today I am announcing new guidelines to allow the housing market to resume. Our clear plan will enable people to move home safely, covering each aspect of the sales and letting process from viewings to removals.

Our step by step plan is based on the latest guidance to ensure the safety and protection of everyone involved.

This critical industry can now safely move forward, and those waiting patiently to move can now do so.

Stewart Baseley, Executive Chairman of the Home Builders Federation, said:

Over the past week or so many house builders have commenced a gradual return to work, in a structured way that ensures the safety of its workforce and the general public.

The industry sustains hundreds of thousands of people in numerous roles and associated sectors, boosting local economies across the country. A resumption of work will play a major part in helping the

economy recover as well as delivering the homes the country needs.

It should also provide the supply chain with the confidence it needs to accelerate its own restart. The Charter is the public facing evidence which supports the very detailed protocols individual builders now have in place to ensure safe working on sites.

John Newcomb, Chief Executive Office of the Builders Merchants Federation, said:

Safety has the highest priority as the industry returns to work. Over the past three weeks, since the publication of new branch operating guidelines, we have seen increasing numbers of merchants safely re-opening or expanding operations to support their trade customers.

House builders structured return to site provides even more confidence within the supply chain, and provides further evidence of the construction industry's determination to assist in the recovery of the UK economy.

Guidance from Public Health England must continue to be followed. For example, anyone advised to self-isolate should continue to do so and not move home.

[Government guidance makes clear](#) that tradespeople including fitters can operate in homes, provided they do so in line with health guidance. Show homes can also re-open, following social distancing guidance.

The Safe Working Charter compliments detailed guidance available from the [Construction Leadership Council](#) on further reducing the risk of infection onsite.

The Government continues to listen to all parts of the housing industry to see what further support may be required.

These measures build on action from the Government to support the economy and protect the capacity of the construction sector, including:

- Introducing more than £330 billion of loans and guarantees to help firms continue operating;
- Deferring self-assessment payments until 2021 – crucial for a sector in which many are self-employed; and
- Providing households across the country with reassurance such as three-month mortgage holidays, including for landlords, alongside a three-month ban on tenant evictions.

Further information

The Health Protection Regulations previously prohibited home moves unless “reasonably necessary”.

The Housing Secretary has announced changes to the planning system to help support safe construction, including:

- Allowing builders to agree more flexible construction site working hours with their local council. This will make it easier to follow public health guidance onsite and stagger builders’ arrival times, making public transport less busy and so reducing the risk of infection.
- Enabling planning authorities and developers to publicise planning applications through social media instead of having to rely on posters and leaflets, helping unblock the service and allowing it to support new development.
- Providing local councils with more flexibility to support smaller developers by allowing them to defer Community Infrastructure Levy payments. This will help smaller developers struggling with their cashflow due to the pandemic while ensuring communities still receive funding towards local infrastructure in the longer term.

Four new Cabinet Office Non-Executive Board Members appointed

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, Michael Gove, has today appointed Lord Hogan-Howe, Baroness Finn, Henry de Zoete and the Rt Hon Gisela Stuart as Non-Executive Board Members for the Cabinet Office. Baroness Finn and Lord Hogan-Howe have been appointed to the audit and risk committee.

They have been appointed for at least three years and will provide independent advice, support and scrutiny on the department’s work. The new board members will work with civil servants and ministers across all areas of the Cabinet Office. They will help focus on the Government’s priorities including responding to the coronavirus pandemic, preparing for the end of the EU exit transition period on 31 December 2020, strengthening the integrity of the Union, and improving the efficiency of the public sector.

They join the existing Non-Executive Board Members, Michael Ashley, chair of the department’s audit and risk committee, Anand Aithal and Karen Blackett OBE.

Non-Executive Board Members are ministerial appointments. All members of the Cabinet Office Board were appointed following open and fair competition.

Alex Chisholm, Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office and Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service said:

Non-executive directors play an important role in ensuring that the Civil Service is well placed to deliver the government's ambitious agenda.

Our new board members bring a wealth of experience and expertise and I look forward to working closely with them.

Rt Hon Gisela Stuart

Served as the Labour Member of Parliament for Birmingham Edgbaston from 1997 until 2017, during which time she was a Health Minister (1999-2001) and member of the Intelligence and Security Select Committee (2015-17). She was formerly co-Chair of Vote Leave and is currently the Chair of Wilton Park, an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Henry de Zoete

Is a tech entrepreneur and the co-founder of Look After My Bills, the largest auto-switching service in the UK, which was acquired by GoCo Group PLC (owners of GoCompare) in July 2019. He has previously served on the Board of grassroots campaigning organisation 38 Degrees (2015-2018), co-founded The Beal Deal in 2014 – which uses tech to facilitate collective bargaining for consumers – and was a Special Adviser in the Department for Education (2010-2014) .

Baroness Finn, of Swansea

Was the Coalition Government's adviser on industrial relations, and subsequently a Special Adviser in the Cabinet Office (2012-2015), the Foreign Office and Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2015-2016). She became a Conservative peer in 2015, and she is the co-founder of FMA Ltd, a consultancy. She also serves on the audit committee of Arbutnot Latham & Co, and is a member of the advisory council of Transparency International, and a trustee of the think tank Demos.

Lord Hogan-Howe, of Sheffield

Served as Commissioner for the London Metropolitan police between 2011-2017. Prior to this he was HM Inspector of Constabulary (2009-2011) and Chief Constable of Merseyside police (2004-2009). He was elevated to the House of Lords as a crossbench peer in 2017. He is a trustee of the Arise Foundation, and a patron of the St Giles Trust.

Business Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 12 May 2020

[Business Secretary Alok Sharma speaking at the daily coronavirus press conference](#)

Good afternoon. I am joined today by Professor Stephen Powis, National Medical Director of NHS England and Sarah Albon who is the Chief Executive of the Health and Safety Executive.

First, I want to update you on the latest data on the coronavirus response.

2,007,146 tests for coronavirus have now been carried out in the UK, including 85,293 tests carried out yesterday.

226,463 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 3,403 cases since yesterday.

11,605 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus, up from 11,465 the previous day

And sadly, of those tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 32,692 have now died. That's an increase of 627 fatalities since yesterday.

This is of course devastating news for families across the UK, and we all need to stay alert and control the virus.

I just want to remind people of the details of the next phase of our fight against coronavirus that we set out this week.

If we turn to the first slide, in order to monitor our progress, we are establishing a new COVID Alert Level System, with five levels, each relating to the level of threat posed by the virus.

The alert level will be based primarily on the R value and the number of coronavirus cases.

And in turn that alert level will determine the level of social distancing measures in place.

The lower the level the fewer the measures; the higher the level the stricter the measures.

The social distancing measures remain critical in our efforts to control the virus.

Throughout the period of lockdown, which started on March 23 we have been at Level 4.

Meaning, a COVID-19 epidemic is in general circulation, and transmission is

high or rising exponentially.

But thanks to the hard work and sacrifices of the British people in this lockdown, you have helped to bring the R level down and we are now in a position to begin moving to Level 3, in careful steps.

As you see on the next slide, we have set out the first of three steps we will take to carefully modify the measures, gradually ease the lockdown, and begin to allow people to return to their way of life – but crucially, while avoiding what would be a disastrous second peak that overwhelms the NHS.

After each step we will closely monitor the impact of that step on the R and the number of infections, and all the available data, and we will only take the next step when we are satisfied that it is safe to do so.

Step 1. From this week:

Those who cannot work from home should now speak to their employer about going back to work.

You can now spend time outdoors and exercise as often as you like.

You can meet one person outside of your household outside provided you stay 2 metres apart.

Step 2. From June 1, at the earliest, as long as the data allows, we aim to allow:

Primary schools to reopen for some pupils, in smaller class sizes.

Non-essential retail to start to reopen, when and where it is safe to do so,

Cultural and sporting events to take place behind closed doors, without crowds.

And then Step 3. No earlier than July 4, and again, only if the data says it is safe, we aim to allow:

More businesses and premises to open, including potentially those offering personal care such as leisure facilities, public places, and places of worship.

Many of these businesses will need to operate in new ways to ensure they are safe, and we will work with these sectors on how to do this.

As you will see from slide 3, having taken the first step in carefully adjusting some of the measures, and our advice to people on what to do, we have also updated our messaging.

We are now asking people to Stay Alert, Control the Virus and Save Lives.

Yes – staying alert, for the vast majority of people, still means staying at home as much as possible.

But there are a range of other actions we're advising people to take.

People should stay alert, by:

Working from home if you can.

Limiting contact with other people.

Keeping distance if you go out – 2 metres apart where possible.

Washing your hands regularly.

Wearing a face covering when you are in enclosed space where it's difficult to be socially distant – for example in some shops and on public transport.

And if you or anyone in your household has symptoms, you all need to self-isolate.

As slide 4 shows, if everyone stays alert and follows the rules, we can control coronavirus by keeping the R down and reducing the number of infections.

This is how we can continue to save lives, and livelihoods, as we begin as a nation to recover from coronavirus.

And to underpin this in the workplace, we have published new [‘COVID-19 secure’ guidance on working safely](#), available to UK employers, across 8 work settings, which are allowed to be open and where their employees cannot work from home.

This also includes guidance for shops which we believe may be in a position to begin a phased reopening at the earliest from the 1 June.

Firms, unions, industry bodies and the devolved administrations have all fed into this guidance to give businesses and their employees the confidence they need to work safely.

And I believe we have reached a consensus in doing that.

We have also worked with Public Health England and the Health and Safety Executive, to develop best practice on the safest ways of working across the economy.

The guidelines outline practical steps for employers to take, including carrying out a COVID-19 risk assessment, in consultation with employees or trades unions.

A downloadable notice is included in the documents, which employers should display in their workplace to show their employees, customers and other visitors, that they have followed this guidance.

We have also provided practical steps for employers to consider such as putting up barriers or screens in shared spaces, creating “fixed teams” or “partnering” to minimise the number of people in contact with one another,

and frequent cleaning of work areas and equipment between uses to reduce transmission.

To support employers and employees through this, the government has made available up to an extra £14 million for the Health and Safety Executive, equivalent to an increase of 10% of their budget.

This is for extra call centre employees, inspectors and equipment, if needed.

We know how important the Job Retention Scheme has been in helping businesses through this difficult time.

And today the Chancellor has announced a four-month extension of the scheme to help provide certainty to businesses.

To date, 7.5 million jobs have been furloughed, protecting livelihoods across the nation.

Until the end of July, there will be no changes to the scheme.

Then from August to October the scheme will continue, for all sectors and regions of the UK, but with greater flexibility to support the transition back to work.

Employers currently using the scheme will be able to bring employees back part time.

And, as the economy reopens, we will ask firms to start sharing, with government, the cost of paying people's salaries.

To be clear, the same level of support of 80% of people's current salary, up to £2,500 will continue to be met, but through a shared effort between employers and government.

We will be setting out more details on the changes before the end of the month.

Throughout this pandemic, I have been struck by the way people have looked out for one another.

These measures are produced in that spirit.

So to employers I say: use this support and guidance to know you are doing the right thing and work with your unions and workers to keep each other safe.

And to workers I say: we are looking out for you; we want you to feel confident that you are financially supported and returning to a safe workplace.

Because in this time like no other, we all need to work together safely, as we rebuild our economy.

Thank you.