

FACT SHEET

CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Background

The [Chemical Weapons Convention](#) (CWC) was adopted by the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva on 3 September 1992, after 12 years of negotiations. The Convention opened for signature on 13 January 1993 and entered into force on 29 April 1997. The CWC is the first disarmament agreement negotiated within a multilateral framework that provides for the elimination of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction by prohibiting the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use of chemical weapons by States Parties. The Chemical Weapons Convention currently has 193 States Parties.

According to article II of the Convention, chemical weapons means:

- a) Toxic chemicals and their precursors, except where intended for purposes not prohibited under this Convention, as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes;
- b) Munitions and devices, specifically designed to cause death or other harm through the toxic properties of those toxic chemicals specified in subparagraph (a), which would be released as a result of the employment of such munitions and devices;
- c) Any equipment specifically designed for use directly in connection with the employment of munitions and devices specified in subparagraph (b).

The [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW) is the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention and its mission is to ensure a credible, transparent regime to verify the destruction of chemical weapons; to prevent their re-emergence in any member State; to provide protection and assistance against chemical weapons; to encourage international cooperation in the peaceful uses of chemistry; to achieve universal membership of the OPCW and to provide a forum for consultation and cooperation among States Parties to the Convention.

The United Nations and the OPCW have a longstanding partnership in the pursuit of the elimination of chemical weapons. The cooperation between both organizations is regulated by the [relationship agreement](#) adopted by the General Assembly in September 2001. The close cooperation between the UN and the OPCW and the mutually reinforcing nature of their work was exemplified by the United Nations Investigation into the Allegation of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (“Sellström Investigation”), the OPCW-UN Joint Mission and the work of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).

Sellström Investigation

The United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (“Sellström Investigation”) was established by the United Nations Secretary-General on 21 March 2013, following requests by the Syrian Arab Republic and other UN Member States to investigate separate allegations of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic. The purpose of this specialized and impartial fact-finding mission, led by Professor Åke Sellström (Sweden), was to establish evidence related to the allegations of chemical weapons use. Upon the request of the Secretary-General, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO) put their resources at the disposal of the UN Mission to support its investigation activities.

The UN Mission began its fact-finding activities in the Syrian Arab Republic on 19 August 2013. On the basis of the sufficiency and credibility of the information received, the UN Mission decided to investigate seven allegations reported to the Secretary-General. The Mission concluded that chemical weapons had been used in the conflict between the parties in the Syrian Arab Republic, in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August 2013 and also on a smaller scale in Jobar on 24 August

“Any use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and a clear violation of international law. Identifying those responsible and holding them to account is of paramount importance. We have a responsibility, particularly to the victims, to ensure accountability for the use of these heinous weapons.”

*Secretary-General's message on the Day of Remembrance for all Victims of Chemical Warfare.
30 November 2021, New York*



Izumi Nakamitsu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), addresses the Security Council meeting on the situation in the Middle East (Syria) (September 2018)

2013, Saraqeb on 29 April 2013, Ashrafiah Sahnaya on 25 August 2013 and Khan Al Asal on 19 March 2013. The UN Mission's final report ([A/68/663-S/2013/735](#)) was submitted on 12 December 2013.

The OPCW-UN Joint Mission for the Elimination of the Chemical Weapons Programme of the Syrian Arab Republic

The [OPCW-UN Joint Mission for the Elimination of the Chemical Weapons Programme of the Syrian Arab Republic](#) was formally established on 16 October 2013, a month after the Syrian Arab Republic deposited its instrument of accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The mandate of the Joint Mission for an accelerated programme to completely eliminate the Syrian Arab Republic's chemical weapons programme by mid-2014, derived from OPCW Executive Council decision [EC-M-33/DEC.1](#) and [UN Security Council resolution 2118 \(2013\)](#). The Joint Mission was headed by the Special Coordinator, Ms. Sigrid Kaag (Netherlands). The OPCW-UN Joint Mission closed on 30 September 2014, although the OPCW continues to undertake the necessary residual activities required to fully implement Security Council resolution 2118 (2013). The OPCW confirmed the complete destruction of all chemical weapons declared by the Syrian Arab Republic on 4 of January 2016.

Pursuant paragraph 12 of resolution 2118 (2013) the Director-General of the OPCW has the obligation to report to the Security Council, through the UN Secretary-General, on the activities related to the implementation of this resolution. Accordingly, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs briefs the Security Council Members, on a monthly basis, on the elimination of the Syrian Arab Republic chemical weapons programme.

The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism

The Security Council adopted [resolution 2235 \(2015\)](#) on 7 August 2015, condemning “any use of any toxic chemical, such as chlorine, as a weapon in the Syrian Arab Republic”, and expressing determination to identify and hold accountable those responsible for such acts. In this resolution, the Security Council established the OPCW– United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) to “identify to the greatest extent feasible” those responsible. On 17 November 2016, the Security Council renewed the JIM's mandate for a further period of one year by adopting [resolution 2319 \(2016\)](#).

The JIM succeeded in implementing its mandate to conduct impartial, objective investigations and was able to identify those responsible for six cases of chemical weapons use in the Syrian Arab Republic¹. Despite several proposals, the Security Council could not agree upon an extension of the JIM's mandate. Consequently, the JIM ceased functioning on 17 November 2017.

The non-renewal of the mandate of the JIM left a gap in the ability of international organizations to identify those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. Therefore, in June 2018, the fourth Special Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention granted the Secretariat of the OPCW the authority to conduct such investigations. Pursuant to paragraph 10 of decision [C-SS-4/DEC.3](#) the OPCW Secretariat established an [Investigation and Identification Team \(IIT\)](#) with the mandate to “identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic by identifying and reporting on all information potentially relevant to the origin of those chemical weapons in those instances in which the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria determines or has determined that use or likely use occurred, and cases for which the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism has not issued a report”. On 8 April 2020 and on 12 April 2021, the IIT released its reports.

The Chemical Weapons Convention Facts

- The Secretary-General of the United Nations is the depositary of the Chemical Weapons Convention.
- 98% of the world's population lives under the protection of the Convention.
- 98% per cent of the world's declared stockpiles of chemical weapons have been destroyed under international verification.

Resources for Further Reading

- The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons website: <https://www.opcw.org/>
- Secretary-General's Disarmament Agenda website: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/sg-agenda/en/>
- 2020 Disarmament Yearbook website: <https://yearbook.unoda.org/2020/>
- Office for Disarmament Affairs website: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/chemical/>



Secretary-General António Guterres addresses Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and security in relation to the situation in the Middle East, specifically Syria. (April 2018)

¹ Three cases in which the Syrian Arab Republic's Armed Forces were responsible for the release of chlorine, one case in which the Syrian government was responsible for the release of sarin, and two cases in which the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) was responsible for the use of sulfur mustard.