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Preventing environmental disasters by destroying chemical weapons

Preliminary draft report

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Summary

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which entered into force in 1997 provides for the elimination of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction under a universally applied verification mechanism. The Convention prohibits the development, production, acquisition, retention, stockpiling and use of all chemical weapons. It requires each state party to eliminate its stocks of chemical weapons and their production facilities within ten years, i.e. until 2007.

To date, the CWC has been ratified by 145 states. Unfortunately, the convention's implementation is progressing only slowly, especially in Russia. This is particularly true with regard to the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles.

This report underlines the risk of the delay in implementing the CWC leading to a general standstill of the chemical disarmament process, which would have a negative impact not only on human health and the environment on the spot but also on disarmament and security at a global level.

The report therefore concludes that major efforts need to be made without delay to stop the proliferation of chemical weapons and the related technology. It also highlights the risk of disaster coming from the remaining stockpiles. The danger of major accidents involving large numbers of victims and severe pollution increases as the stockpiles grow older. Moreover, the risk of chemical weapons being stolen will remain as long as stockpiles exist. There is a particular concern here about small artillery shells that can easily be used for terrorist acts or in regional conflicts.

For these reasons, the report urges Council of Europe member states to make a greater commitment to rapid chemical disarmament, since that is the best method of preventing disasters and much less expensive than the efforts that would be required to cope with disasters once they have occurred.

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1. Introduction/historical background

So-called modern chemical weapons were used for the first time on 22 April 1915 at Ypres. The waves of chlorine gas released by the German army left 5 000 dead and 10 000 injured. 1916 saw the first attack with a combat gas as such, in other words, a substance especially developed for military use (phosgene, a toxic gas). New substances were subsequently developed at a growing pace and used increasingly frequently. A total of 125 000 tonnes of chemical substances were used during World War I. They killed or injured 1.3 million people.

The pressure of international public opinion arising from the terror provoked by the use of combat gases during the war that had just ended led to the signing of the Geneva Protocol on 17 June 1925. This convention prohibited the first-strike use of chemical weapons. However, the development, manufacture and stockpiling of chemical weapons and their use for the purpose of retaliation continued to be allowed.

The Allied occupation forces' discovery of facilities for the production of nerve gases, which were unknown to them at the time, had two impacts. Firstly, many countries set up research programmes on chemical weapons to improve their means of protection or develop their own nerve gases. Secondly, they began destroying several hundreds of thousands of tonnes of chemical weapons dating from World War I, as the discovery of nerve gases meant that they were no longer of any interest from a military point of view. The destruction of large amounts of these weapons was carried out over a very short period of time, often as quickly and as cheaply as possible, i.e. by incineration, burying or underwater dumping.

Chemical weapons have been used frequently since World War II, most recently during the Iran-Iraq war, against the Kurdish settlement of Halabджа in Iraq and in Tokyo, in 1995, in the first large-scale terrorist attack with chemical weapons (sarin).

2. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

The development of the atomic bomb gradually led to the disappearance of chemical weapons from the military doctrines. Negotiations on a new convention on chemical weapons were started in the late 1960s. However, the tense atmosphere during the Cold War meant that progress was exceedingly slow. It was not until 13 January 1993 that the “Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons, and on their Destruction” (Chemical Weapons Convention, CWC) was signed in Paris. The CWC, which is of unlimited duration, is the most progressive global disarmament agreement to date. For this reason, some of its aspects ought to be incorporated into the conventions on biological and nuclear weapons. The new approaches are as follows:

- The principle of a total and non-discriminatory ban, i.e., unlike the situation with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, none of the States Parties is entitled to possess or hold chemical weapons.
- Direct supervision of compliance with the Convention by means of on-site inspections and regular and thorough inspections of stockpiling and destruction facilities and the chemical industry.
- (Although it has never been activated so far) the instrument of challenge inspections that can be carried out any time, anywhere and which cannot be refused.
- The exclusion of states that are not parties to the Convention from world trade in certain chemical products.

With the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention on 29 April 1997, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is responsible for the implementation of the CWC, began work in The Hague. Each member state submits a declaration on production facilities potentially capable of producing chemical weapons and on any previous offensive weapons development programmes to the OPCW. On the basis of these declarations, the OPCW monitors the destruction of any chemical weapons or chemical weapons production facilities and carries out regular inspections of declared chemical plants that could be used to produce chemical weapons.

By the end of December 2001, 145 states have acceded to the CWC. The OPCW employs a staff of approximately 500, including over 200 inspectors. It conducted its 1000th inspection in summer 2001. Four member states (India, Russia, South Korea and the United States) have declared to possess stockpiles of chemical weapons and three of them have begun destruction programmes.

<http://www.opcw.org>

3. Implementation of the CWC endangered

Some chemical weapons can be manufactured easily and at low cost and still have devastating effects. Thousands of people could be killed with small numbers of these weapons. The huge quantities of chemical weapons that were dumped underwater during the 20th century or that are still stockpiled on land since the Cold War pose a major problem and a real threat to the people on the spot.

In an address to the Swiss Parliament on 12 December 2000, the former Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, said in substance that we had all made the mistake years ago of dumping thousands of tonnes of chemical weapons into almost all of the world's oceans. Trying to recover the relevant containers from the ocean bed or leaving them and their contents to rust away over time was another challenge that we had not yet addressed. The threat of people using these terrifying weapons in regional conflicts, as we had seen during the Iran-Iraq war or in the terrorist attack on the Tokyo underground five years ago, would haunt us and our children for years to come.

Under the 1993 CWC, all chemical weapons stockpiles have to be destroyed by 2007. This deadline can, in exceptional cases, be extended until 2012 at the latest. At this moment, however, it looks uncertain whether the CWC can be implemented according to its schedule and in a manner that does not threaten the environment or public health. On the one hand, there is a lack of financial resources for eliminating chemical weapons stockpiles, especially in Russia. On the other hand, there is a lack of political will or pressure to allocate the necessary funds. The collapse of the CWC would not only be a setback for global security and stability but would also mean a risk of proliferation of chemical weapons and the related technology. In addition, the regions concerned could suffer economic disadvantages (no investment in areas, that are contaminated or where there is a risk of disaster). Finally, the stockpiles involve major risks for the health of the communities concerned because of the long-term contamination of water and soil.

4. Recent developments

According to its own declarations, Russia is the country that possesses most chemical weapons, inherited from the former Soviet Union. These weapons are stockpiled at seven locations:

- In Gorny and Kambarka, there are a total of 7 520 tonnes of old arsenic-based vesicants stockpiled in tanks with a capacity of 80 tonnes each. The leaking of these tanks would be a major environmental hazard.
- In Shchuch'ye, Kizner, Maradikova, Leonidovka and Pochev, there are a total of 32 480 tonnes of nerve gases in munitions ready for use. Various inspections of these munitions have shown that large quantities of them are in excellent condition and will remain so for the next 10 to 20 years.

The Russian government adopted the country's chemical disarmament programme on 21 March 1996. In 1999, they estimated the cost of the programme at some 4.7 billion Euro. On 4 November 1997, the Russian parliament ratified the CWC, thereby submitting the destruction of the country's chemical weapons to international inspection. The ratification came after the international community had signalled that it was willing to provide substantial support for this disarmament programme. However, the support was slow in coming. Following the collapse of the rouble in August 1998, the decreasing support from the international community plunged the Russian disarmament programme into a severe crisis.

In order to put it back on a credible footing, the Putin government decided to transfer responsibility for the programme from the Defence Ministry to the new Munitions Agency. At the same time, a new destruction plan was drawn up, which is supposed to reduce costs by 30 to 50%. It provides for the building of only three of the seven destruction sites originally planned.

Russia now regards chemical disarmament as one of its most important international obligations, and included an amount corresponding to 120 million US dollars in its 2001 budget for the implementation of this disarmament programme.

Several countries, first and foremost the United States of America, have already provided support for the Russian chemical weapons destruction programme. However, the US government has provisionally frozen its financial assistance, arguing that the assistance provided by European countries is inadequate in overall terms.

The European contribution to date stands at about 60 million Euro with a further 10 million Euro currently under discussion in various European countries. Apart of the EU itself, the countries committed to this task are: Germany, Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, Norway and – from 2003 onward and with a substantive amount of funds and expertise – Switzerland.

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, it has become more obvious that the destruction of Russia's chemical weapons is a priority for Western Europe, given the potential terrorist use of these weapons.

It is essential for efforts to be stepped up if the potential risks are to be reduced as quickly as possible.

5. Conclusion

The report calls for:

- Council of Europe member states to be urged to step up their financial and political efforts with regard to the destruction of the chemical weapons stockpiles in general,
- Council of Europe member states to be asked to step up their joint assistance to the Russian destruction programme for chemical weapons,
- all states that have not yet joined the Convention to be encouraged to ratify it,
- Council of Europe member states to support public information campaigns especially in the countries most affected,
- **COUNCIL OF EUROPE MEMBER STATES TO MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO CLEAN UP THEIR OWN CONTAMINATED SITES AND REGIONS, IN PARTICULAR THE SOIL AND SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES.**