

Speech by Uri Rosenthal, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, at the opening of the Conference on International Cooperation and Chemical Safety and Security, Peace Palace, The Hague, 12 September 2011

Director-General Üzümcü, Professor Crutzen, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start with the words of a famous man of peace:

‘You have been summoned by history and you have answered its call. One of the most monstrous tools of warfare has been ruled intolerable by all States Parties. We who have gathered here in The Hague need look no farther than to the fields of Flanders or to the streets of Halabjah to see proof of how our century has been scarred and shamed by the use of chemical weapons. What we can do at its close, however, is to help ensure that they never again can become part of any nation's arsenal, never again the scourge of any battlefield, never again the silent but certain doom of a civilian population.’

I have just quoted former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the First Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention in The Hague in 1997, 15 years ago.

Promoting international peace and stability has always been and will continue to be an important component of Dutch foreign policy. The Peace Palace, where we are gathered today, bears witness to our long tradition of international law and our active role in its practice. This goes back to Grotius’ ‘Mare Liberum’.

The Netherlands is particularly proud to host the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the OPCW. The Organization has had its seat in The Hague since 1997, the year in which the Chemical Weapons Convention came into force. It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the Peace Palace, and to this OPCW Conference on Cooperation in Chemical Safety and Security.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Chemical Weapons Convention is a great example of effective multilateralism. It is the first multilateral agreement that bans an entire category of weapons of mass destruction. The Netherlands was an active player in its development. What's more, with 188 States Parties, the Convention is close to becoming a universal one. Including South Sudan, only eight states are missing.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons oversees the implementation of the Convention. Since its start in 1997 it has made impressive progress. Firstly, in the elimination of chemical weapons: so far, two thirds of all declared stockpiles of possessor States Parties have been destroyed under strict international verification. This is a total of more than 46,000 metric tonnes. Secondly, a unique feature of the Convention is the verification mechanism for the chemical industry. Last April, the OPCW completed its two-thousandth inspection of a declared chemical facility.

Of course, the core objective of the Chemical Weapons Convention is the complete and permanent elimination of all chemical weapons. The destruction of 100% of the declared stockpiles and of old or abandoned chemical weapons at the earliest possible date must remain the key priority. As the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once said, 'Chemical weapons are inhumane. They kill horribly, massively and – once deployed – are no more controllable than the wind.'¹

With the destruction of stockpiles well under way, now is also the time to start thinking about how to make sure that chemicals weapons will never reappear. With this in mind, I welcome Director-General Üzümcü's initiative to establish an independent advisory panel. Its recently published report contains valuable recommendations. The key question is how we can prevent the development of new chemical weapons or the use of toxic chemicals for hostile purposes? And how can we foster the development of chemistry for the well-being of people?

¹ Washington DC, 1997.

In my view, stepping up cooperation between public and private partners, and between States Parties' governments and the chemical industry, is crucial indeed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The world has changed considerably since 1993, when the Chemical Weapons Convention was opened for signature. Science and technology are advancing rapidly, creating new opportunities but also new risks. The scale and regional landscape of the chemical industry have changed dramatically. Our security has become increasingly tied to regional and international developments. To protect ourselves from today's transnational threats, such as terrorism, organised crime, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and cyber attacks, we need more unity of purpose and action than ever before. International security is in our common interest. Cooperative security, as stressed in NATO's new Strategic Concept, is our joint responsibility.

The threat of 'traditional' chemical warfare, as seen for the first time on the battlefield of Ypres in Belgium in the First World War, has declined significantly. But other forms of chemical weapons have meanwhile been used for their capacity to cause terror. The attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in 1995 proved that non-state actors can and do not hesitate to use chemical weapons. The attack, using the nerve agent sarin, killed 13 innocent civilians and injured over 6,000. In fact, the leader of Aum aimed to kill more people than the Kobe earthquake. We must at all cost prevent Al Qa'ida or any other international terrorist organisation from acquiring such weapons. NATO's new Strategic Concept clearly states that 'modern technology increases the threat and potential impact of terrorist attacks.' This threat concerns us all – governments, the private sector, the military and civilians alike.

To implement the Convention, all States Parties adopt and enforce legislation to ensure that toxic chemicals and their precursors are not used for prohibited purposes. This is a major challenge – especially in view of modern technological developments. Measures to regulate trade and the chemical industry must be constantly updated and upgraded. We have to prevent know-how, materials and equipment for making toxic chemicals from falling into the wrong hands. Through

international cooperation the OPCW provides assistance to States Parties to ensure that the right regulations and enforcement measures are coming into place.

We cannot achieve compliance with the Convention merely through regulation by governments and verification by the OPCW. Support is needed from all stakeholders in the chemical industry, as well as the research and academic communities, and other relevant players in society, including civil society.

I understand there are concerns in the chemical industry about the administrative burden of the verification mechanism. The Netherlands is a strong advocate of minimising these burdens as much as possible. We are glad that, together with Malaysia, we have helped changing the way the OPCW selects sites for inspection. The result should be that it can focus on sites which are more relevant for the Convention.

The chemical industry is also concerned about uneven regulation in different countries. We should preserve a level playing field. In my view, this is exactly why closer cooperation between governments and the industry is crucial.

Director-General Üzümcü has already said that OPCW inspections have become accepted as a norm in the chemical industry. So closer cooperation is also an opportunity. Promoting equal security and safety standards all over the world will help to create the necessary level playing field and create a better environment for economic development and international exchange. Improving cooperation between governments and industry will definitely benefit us all.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today's conference on cooperation in chemical safety and security brings together all the relevant stakeholders: international and regional organisations, governments, the chemical industry, NGOs, academics and think tanks.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon once said, ‘As we recall the unspeakable horror endured by victims of chemical weapons, let us all reaffirm our common commitment to eliminate the dangers posed by such instruments of mass destruction. And let us redouble our efforts to build a chemical weapons-free world.’²

I call on all of you to present here in The Hague action-oriented ideas on how States Parties and the industry can work together on equal safety and security standards. We also need concrete proposals on how to involve the scientific community more in the work of the OPCW.

Preventing the proliferation of chemical weapons is our joint responsibility and is in our common interest. I wish you a productive and action-oriented conference.

Thank you.

² High-Level Meeting to Commemorate the Tenth Anniversary of the Chemical Weapons Convention, New York, 2007.