

Statement for the Plenary Session

Madam Chair, Director-General, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

For more than five years now Green Cross has supported the victims of Saddam Hussein's poison gas attacks in Halabja in Northern Iraq. We do this via the local NGO Wadi. The social and medical measures comprise mobile medical teams to treat physical and psychological health problems in the remote villages. The survivors and even the next generation are still today suffering a lot, more than 25 years after the attack. Because they are so much traumatized, but also because they are very poor, mothers cannot take care of their children normally. That is why we send play busses to these villages where children can play and have fun for a whole day. In the last year the play bus also visited Syrian refugee camps in the region.

Another important problem which prevents the people in Halabja to live happily is their fear that toxic pollutants from the poison gas attacks are still present in the environment and that they contaminate food, drinking water, soil, and livestock in the region. Please help us with expert resources to clarify important questions for the traumatized victims of chemical weapons in both Iraq and Iran over the past 25 years or more. .

As H.E. Mr Ahmet Üzümcü, Director-General of the OPCW, said: the inhabitants of Halabja were subjected to the most unspeakable atrocity – the use of chemical weapons against innocent and unprotected civilians. This helped build the strong resolve of the international community to permanently rid our world from the threat of chemical weapons. It has thus played a crucial role in establishing the success of the Chemical Weapons Convention and in achieving near-universal adherence to it so that future generations are spared the horror and suffering that occurred in Halabja in 1988. And the Chemical Weapons Convention NGO Coalition (CWCC), which Green Cross helped to initiate and has supported ever since, supplements these efforts with focused civil society action aimed at achieving full membership of the CWC.

Sadly though, exactly 25 years after the poison gas attacks in Northern Iraq, several residential areas of Damascus, the Ghoutas, were hit by a major chemical weapons attack causing the death of an estimated 1'400 civilians and injuring many more. The world was shocked and under international pressure the Syrian government joined the Chemical Weapons Convention and assented to the OPCW-led destruction of its declared chemical weapons arsenals.

Internationally, the chemical weapons attack in Syria helped build the strong resolve of the international community even further to permanently rid our world from the threat of chemical weapons. This recent attack has thus played a crucial role for awarding the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for their "extensive work to eliminate chemical weapons".

Consequently H.E. Mr Ahmet Üzümcü, Director-General of the OPCW told reporters that he hoped his organization's work can help "achieve peace in Syria and end the suffering of its people." But over one year after these tragic attacks, the still-besieged Ghoutas have not received substantial international aid and the survivors are still suffering from heavy after-effects due to their exposure to toxic agents.

Therefore Green Cross has recently successfully implemented an emergency aid project in Ghouta together with the Syrian partner organization, Al-Seeraj. The project is aimed at providing urgently needed medicine against the further spread of diseases within the population already weakened by the chemical attacks. But the ill and traumatized people need much more support. Falah Muradkhin, survivor of the 1988 attacks and who is today project coordinator of the local partner organization of Green Cross, Wadi, mourns the victims of the Ghouta attacks and points out that “25 years ago the technology was not available to send immediate news and reports to the world about what happened in Halabja. Today, however, the situation is different. The horrible pictures from the Ghoutas were quickly disseminated and seen by many people. Yet no adequate response has been seen either from the United Nations, nor from countries, which supposedly were involved in the development of Syria’s or Iraq’s chemical weapon arsenals“, nor from Muslim countries for helping their brothers and sisters in the region. Green Cross is therefore calling for immediate international support of the forgotten victims of the Ghouta-attacks.

As said, Green Cross is also supporting actively the establishment of a world truly free of chemical weapons. In view of the close relationship between all three classes of weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical, and biological – Green Cross calls for the establishment of a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-free zone as a next step, because there will be no real security for the people living in this politically tense region as long as there are any weapons of mass destruction stockpiled.

I hope you can help us support the victims of chemical weapons attacks as outlined; they fundamentally need and deserve such assistance. And thank you for your ongoing commitment and continued work so that future generations are forever spared the horror and suffering that occurred in Halabja in 1988 and 25 years later again in Syria.

I ask that this statement be made a part of the final CSP report.

Nathalie Gysi, Executive Director, Green Cross Switzerland