

We cannot ignore what has happened in Salisbury: UN Security Council statement

Statement by Ambassador Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council meeting requested by Russia on the Salisbury attack.

5 April 2018

Thank you very much Mr President.

We didn't seek this meeting but we take requests from the Council to meet very seriously and I am pleased to be able to update the Council on some developments, but I am also pleased to be able to provide the intellectual clarity our Russian colleague has called for and I will stick in my statement to the facts.

Following the poisoning on 4 March in Salisbury of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, the UK has launched one of the most comprehensive and complex investigations into the use of a chemical weapon ever, it involves more than 250 police detectives. They are supported by a range of specialist experts and partners. They are trawling through more than 5000 hours of CCTV. They are examining more than 1,350 seized exhibits. And they are interviewing more than 500 witnesses.

Mr President, in the UK the police are independent of government but if there are more details we can share with the Council as the investigation proceeds, we would be very happy to do so.

We all know what that investigation is under ways, it's because a military grade nerve agent was used in an attempt to kill civilians on British soil. It was carried out recklessly, and it was carried out without regard for public safety. It was a weapon of mass destruction. A British police officer was in a critical condition alongside the Skripals. And ordinary members of the public going about their daily business were put at risk.

Mr President, I am glad not only to be able to inform the Council that Yulia Skripal is able to communicate and is getting better, I can also clarify what the Russian Ambassador said about consular access. We have received a request from the Russian consulate. We have conveyed it to Yulia Skripal. And we await her response. This is an obligation under international law that the British government takes very seriously but there is also the question of Ms Skripal's own wishes which need to be taken into account.

Mr President, the Russian Ambassador had several points to make about the UK demands of Russia. As he outlined, on 12 March we asked the Russian government a clear question. Russia refused to respond and said it considered the request 'null and void'. It was indeed true, Mr President, that we asked for a response within 24 hours for an answer to the question how did a Russian developed military grade nerve agent come to be on the streets of Salisbury? And did that mean that Russia had lost control of its chemical weapons stocks?

We said that Russia should declare its Novichok programme to the Organisation of Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). We gave 24 hours Mr President because this is a weapon of mass destruction. It is no ordinary poisoning and no ordinary attack and in our view the circumstances justified that tight deadline. But, notwithstanding that, the Russians said to us the request was ‘null and void’. They did not say ‘please give us more time’, they did not come to us and say ‘we would like to look into this with you’. They rejected the very premise of the request.

We have said, as the Russian Ambassador quoted, that it is highly likely Russia carried out this assassination. The British government came to that conclusion because the positive identification by experts at Porton Down of the specific chemical used is a type of Novichok nerve agent. Porton Down, Mr President, is an accredited laboratory under, and it conforms to, the Chemical Weapons Convention. It is allowed to conduct protective research.

The second reason that helped us come to our conclusion was the knowledge that Russia has produced this nerve agent within the last 10 years and remains capable of doing so and as the Prime Minister made clear within the British Parliament we know that the Russian state has investigated ways of assassination through the use of nerve agent.

The third reason is Russia’s record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations and I don’t want to detain the Council Mr President by going through a long list but I can provide examples if anyone would like to hear them. And we also made our own assessment that Russia views defectors as suitable targets for assassination and indeed there are public statements from Russian leaders to that effect.

I’d like if I may, Mr President, just to say something about the use of the phrase ‘highly likely’. We use this phrase because under the British system only a court can finally determine culpability so the use of the phrase ‘highly likely’ is a reflection on the judicial process and should not be construed as casting doubt whatsoever on the likelihood of Russia being responsible.

I would also like to take this opportunity to address the Russian Ambassador’s comment about Porton Down contradicting the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson. There was no contradiction. The Foreign Secretary was making clear that Porton Down were sure the nerve agent was a Novichok – a point they have subsequently reinforced.

He goes on in the same interview to make clear why based on that information, additional intelligence and, as I said, the lack of alternative explanation from the Russians, we have reached the conclusion we have. What the Foreign Secretary said then, and what Porton Down have said recently, is fully consistent with what we have said throughout.

In contrast Mr President we have had innumerable theories from the Russians, I think we have counted some 24 in all. On 21 March for example the Russian Foreign Ministry said they believed terrorists did it. On the 14 March, Mr Lavrov said the British response was aimed at distracting from Brexit. Mr President, the use of chemical weapons on any country’s territory is far too serious for these theories to hold water.

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which came into force 21 years ago, is clear in its Article VII that states must adopt legislation criminalising activity prohibited under the

convention. That's why the UK is conducting a full investigation of the incident, including under our own Chemical Weapons Act. Because of this, in addition to the UK criminal investigation, we invited the OPCW, the relevant international body, to assist in verifying our analysis and this is on the basis of Article VIII of the Chemical Weapons Convention. This mandates the Technical Secretariat to provide technical assistance and technical evaluation to States Parties.

Everything we have done, Mr President, has been consistent with the Convention on Chemical Weapons. And if I may say so, Mr President, I won't take any lectures on morality or our responsibilities under Conventions from a country, which as this Council debated yesterday, has done so much to block the proper investigation of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The UK's track record on that, Mr President, speaks for itself.

On 21 March, OPCW deployed a team to the UK to visit the locations where the victims were exposed to a toxic chemical. The Director General briefed the OPCW Executive Committee yesterday on their actions. OPCW expert staff collected environmental samples from the scene and biomedical samples from the victims. OPCW has verified the chain of custody. These samples have been sent to several designated laboratories for testing. Analysis from the laboratories will now be returned to the OPCW, who will produce a report. Contrary to the Russian claims, Mr President, the United Kingdom looks forward to sharing its findings once we have received that report.

Yesterday, Russia tabled a resolution at the OPCW Executive Committee proposing a joint investigation. Mr President, there are several ways to view this joint investigation. I think the metaphor that I find most apt is that of an arsonist turned firefighter, but in this particular instance, the arsonist wishes to investigate his own fire.

Having failed to get a joint investigation, the resolution only received 6 out of 41 votes in favour. And without waiting for the outcome of OPCW testing, Russia has reverted to a familiar path of undermining the international institution involved. There is no other construction we can place for Mr Lavrov's remarks today that Russia "will accept results of the OPCW Salisbury poisoning investigation only if Russian experts participate in it." I am sorry Mr President, but that does not make it an independent investigation.

If Russia insists on having its own experts, it seeks to move away from the Chemical Weapons Convention's stipulation and it is setting a test that no independent investigation could credibly tolerate.

This is part of a wider pattern of irresponsible Russian behaviour. Russia discredited the Joint Investigative Mechanism into use of chemical weapons in Syria. Members of the Council will be familiar with the pattern of aggression over the years in Georgia and Crimea. There has been the shooting down of MH17, and there has been a bungled attempt at a coup in Montenegro. And each time, Mr President, these acts are accompanied by distortion and disinformation. The same sort of distortion and disinformation we saw yesterday in the Hague, in the Russian press conferences, and in the Security Council today.

Mr President, whilst we ourselves would not have called this meeting today, we hope to be able to brief the Council further once we receive the report from OPCW. We do believe that it is

right that the Security Council remains seized of this flagrant use of chemical weapons, and it is that use which threatens international peace and security. The threats to the chemical weapons convention from attacks in Syria, in Malaysia and now the United Kingdom pose a serious challenge to the non-proliferation regime that this Council and others have carefully constructed in response to the terrible events of the past. There is one country among us Mr President, Russia, which is playing fast and loose with our collective security and the international institutions that protect us.

It is that reason, Mr President, that leads people to accuse Russia and to take steps against her. It is not out of lack of friendship with the Russian people or lack of respect from Russia as a country. My own Foreign Secretary visited in the hope of establishing a more productive relationship with Foreign Minister Lavrov. But we cannot ignore what has happened in Salisbury. We cannot ignore Russia turning a blind eye to the use of chemical weapons in Syria and in Salisbury. And we cannot ignore the way that Russia seeks to undermine the international institutions, which have kept us safe since the end of the Second World War.

Mr President, we believe that the UK's actions stand up to any scrutiny. We have acted in accordance with the CWC throughout, and through the body charged for these purposes, the OPCW, we are happy to come to Council at any time. We would be very willing to hold an open briefing at our Mission here in New York if there are Members of the UN that still have questions. We have nothing to hide, Mr President, but I do fear that Russia might have something to fear.

Thank you very much.

Rebuttal by Ambassador Karen Pierce

Thank you very much Mr President, I won't detain colleagues for very long. There is another very good quote from Alice in Wonderland which is: 'sometimes I've believed as many as 6 impossible things before breakfast' so I think that's the quote the suits my Russian colleague best.

I just wanted to say that I am committed to keeping the Council updated. We will share with the Council at the Council's request as much information as we can, as and when we have it and in accordance with developments.

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Zdroj: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-cannot-ignore-what-has-happened-in-salisbury>