

Statement by Ambassador Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council Briefing on the OPCW findings on the Salisbury attack

18 April 2018

Thank you very much, Mr President. Thank you very much to the High Representative who has read out the findings and thank you also, on behalf of the United Kingdom, to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and its staff themselves.

The Council invited us to keep it updated, Mr President. Thank you for agreeing to this meeting today. We wish to brief on the latest stage in the investigation but I will also cover briefly findings, attribution and a refutation of some of the public statements that have been made by Russia against my country.

This meeting is being held immediately after one in The Hague, that the High Representative referred to, of the Executive Council of the OPCW and I would just like to stress, if I may Mr President, that the report itself has been circulated without any redaction or amendment to the states parties and to underscore the point I'd like to stress that the report to Executive Council members is exactly the same the report that the United Kingdom itself received. As the High Representative has set out the OPCW's findings confirm the United Kingdom's analysis of the identity of the toxic chemical. It supports our finding that a military-grade nerve agent was used in Salisbury. As our investigation has found, and OPCW has verified, the highest concentrations of the agent were found on the handle of Mr Skripal's front door. It is therefore, Mr President, the chemical that we said it was and this has been confirmed by an independent mechanism.

I'd like to just say a word about the use of the term Novichok. This is a term we use to describe these chemicals. We take the Russian term for such nerve agents. The OPCW report itself does not use the term Novichok but the point I wish to stress is that it is the chemical that we said it was. And so there shouldn't be any lack of clarity on that point. The report sets out the full forensic chain of custody. It sets out how there could be no contamination. It explains how environmental samples were analysed by two laboratories and biomedical samples by two further laboratories. Finally, the report notes the absence of any significant amounts of impurities in the chemicals that were detected. 'High purity' is the description given in the Executive Summary in paragraph 11. This suggests, in turn, that a highly sophisticated laboratory, ie a state laboratory, made the chemicals.

The identification of the nerve agent used is an essential piece of technical evidence in the ongoing investigation. But the Porton Down analysis and the OPCW report do not identify the country or laboratory of origin of the agent used in this attack. So I would like to explain Mr President, the wider picture which has led the United Kingdom to assess that there's no plausible alternative explanation than Russian State responsibility for what happened in Salisbury.

In our view, Mr President, only Russia had the technical means, operational experience and the motive to target the Skripals.

If I may turn first to technical means. A combination of credible open-source reporting and intelligence shows that in the 1980s the Soviet Union developed a new class of fourth generation nerve agents. These were known in Russia, and then more broadly, as Novichoks. The key institute responsible for this work is a branch of the State Institute for Organic Chemistry and Technology at Shikhany. The code word for the offensive chemical weapons programme, of which Novichoks were one part, was FOLIANT. It is highly likely that Novichoks were developed to prevent detection by the West and to circumvent international chemical weapons controls. The Russian State has previously produced Novichoks and would still be capable of doing so today. Within the last decade, Russia has produced and stockpiled small quantities of Novichoks. Russia's chemical weapons programme continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By 1993, when Russia signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, it's likely that some Novichoks had passed acceptance testing. This meant they could be used by the Russian military. Russia's CWC declaration failed to report work on Novichoks. Russia further developed some Novichoks after ratifying the Convention and in the mid-2000s President Putin himself was closely involved in the Russian chemical weapons programme. It is highly unlikely Mr President, that any former Soviet Republic other than Russia pursued an offensive chemical weapons programme after independence. No terrorist group or non-state actor would be able to produce this agent in the purity described by the OPCW testing and this is something Russia has acknowledged.

Secondly Mr President, I'd like to refer to operational experience. Russia has a proven record of conducting state sponsored assassinations including on the territory of the United Kingdom. The independent inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko concluded in January 2016 that he was deliberately poisoned with polonium; that the FSB had directed the operation; and that President Putin probably approved it. During the 2000s, Russia commenced a programme to test means of delivering chemical warfare agents and to train personnel from special units in the use of such weapons. This programme subsequently included investigation of ways of delivering nerve agents including by application to door handles. Within the last decade, as I said, Russia has produced and stockpiled small quantities of Novichoks under this programme.

Thirdly, motive: Sergei Skripal was a former Russian military intelligence officer from the GRU. He was convicted of espionage in 2006. It is highly likely that the Russian intelligence services view at least some of its defectors as legitimate targets for assassination. We have information indicating Russian intelligence service interest in the Skripals and this dates back at least as far as 2013 when email accounts belonging to Yulia Skripal were targeted by GRU cyber-specialists.

Mr President, none of these stocks and production have been declared in Russia's chemical weapons declaration. It is clear that Russia is in breach of its obligations to declare its chemical weapons programme.

I'd now like to turn if I may, Mr President, to an update on the Skripals themselves and their medical condition and the consular situation and then also on the investigation itself.

The Russians asked us to pass on the offer to provide consular services to Yulia and their request to see her and we have done that. Yulia herself said in a statement on 11 April: "I have access to my friends and family. I have been made aware of my specific contacts at the Russian Embassy who have kindly offered me their assistance in any way they can. At the moment I do not wish to avail myself of their services but if I change my mind I know how to contact them".

A medical update from the Medical Director Salisbury District Hospital. In the four weeks since the incident in the city centre, the Skripals have received round-the-clock care from clinicians and they have been able to draw on advice and support from the world's leading experts in this field.

Because of the Skripal's right to privacy, I will not go into great detail about the treatment we have been providing but we can say the following: Nerve agents work by attaching themselves to a particular enzyme in the body which then stops the nerves from working properly. This results in symptoms such as sickness, hallucinations and confusion. The hospital, in treating the patients, was able to stabilise them, ensuring that the patients could breathe and blood could continue to circulate. They then needed to use a variety of different drugs to support the patients until they could create more enzymes to replace those affected by the poisoning. The hospital also used specialised decontamination techniques to remove any residual toxins. Both patients have responded exceptionally well to the treatment that we have been providing but both patients are at different stages in their recovery.

Turning to decontamination in the investigation, as we have said before this has been one of the most comprehensive and complex investigations into the use of chemical weapons ever undertaken. It has involved 250 police detectives. They have been supported by a range of experts and partners and they have gone through more than 5,000 hours of video footage and they have interviewed more than 500 witnesses.

The British government announced on 17 April that decontamination work in Salisbury is starting this week. It will take some months to complete. In total, nine sites, including three in the city centre, have been identified as requiring specialist decontamination. This will involve a complex process of testing, the removal of items which could be contaminated and that might in turn harbour residual amounts of the agent, and it also involves chemical cleaning and re-testing. All waste will be safely removed and incinerated. Each site will not be released until decontamination is complete.

Mr President, we've heard a number of allegations against the UK and against the findings from the Russian Federation. I would like to deal briefly if I may with some of the most egregious.

One accusation that we faced today and in recent days was that Yulia had not been poisoned, that the British government had in fact drugged her and put her in a coma and then injected her with the poisons that were found. Mr President, this is more than fanciful. It is outlandish. That sort of thing may happen in Russia but I can assure the Council it does not and will not happen in the United Kingdom.

Secondly Mr President, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has claimed that traces of the toxic chemical BZ were found in the samples analysed by the OPCW and this disclosed the location of one of the independent laboratories that OPCW used. The OPCW themselves have not disclosed the identity of the labs nor have they produced any information about BZ samples in the Executive Summary that they released to the public. So it is an interesting question Mr President: how and why does Russia think it knows who tested the samples and what result they found? By making this confidential information public, Russia has in turn breached the confidentiality that states-parties owe the OPCW under the Chemical Weapons Convention. On the substance of that allegation Mr President, the OPCW Director General explained in his statement today that a separate sample, separate from the samples taken from the Skripals and their environment, a separate sample with BZ in it was sent with the samples taken from Salisbury to the designated laboratories for testing. This is called a control sample and it is a routine procedure carried out in these tests so the OPCW can test whether the labs findings are accurate. The Director-General has confirmed unreservedly that there was no BZ in any of the samples taken by OPCW in Salisbury. I believe, Mr President, that Russia is fully familiar with this procedure so I would be grateful to know what motive Mr Lavrov had in setting out this obfuscation.

Mr President, Russia continues to ask to be involved in the UK's independent investigation. It is quite clear that they are both suspected of involvement and that their behaviour has undermined their credibility on this. As I said before, this is an arsonist-turned-firefighter trying to investigate his own fire. Russia has failed to establish any good reason, under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) or otherwise, why they should be involved in the UK's independent police investigation.

But if I may Mr President, I repeat what I said at the first briefing in this Council that I took part in on Salisbury. We did go to the Russian Federation, before we went to OPCW, to ask them if this was a rogue attempt by one of their agents and if so, to cooperate with us in trying to get to the bottom of it and resolve the case. And the Russian Federation did not agree to that request Mr President, rather they refused to take it seriously.

On 13 April, the Russian Federation transmitted to the United Kingdom a list of questions under Article IX of the Chemical Weapons Convention. We will respond as soon as possible and certainly within the 10 days stipulated in the Convention. We will respond to Russia who made the request but we will share our response with all states parties and if I can under the CWC, Mr President, I will of course share it with members of the Council. Russia said that requests were urgent and they have asked us for an answer by no later than 17 April which we have not done because we have 10 days. But we regret that Russia did not consider it urgent when we asked them for an explanation on 12th March. Our questions, Mr President, remain unanswered.

Mr President, that concludes the briefing I have to offer the Council today. We are at the Council's disposal to answer any questions. We are also very willing to continue to keep the Council updated if the Council would like that. We're happy to do that in person or possibly, so as not to disrupt your timetable, in writing. I should mention also that we held an open briefing for all Member States yesterday in the General Assembly and they had a number of questions that we were able to answer.

Thank you Mr President.

Right of reply by Ambassador Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council Briefing on the OPCW findings on the Salisbury attack, Wednesday, 18 April
Thank you very much Mr President. I will be brief. I was asked a number of questions by the Russian Ambassador.

I have nothing to add to what I said in relation to the OPCW report that has just been published, the way the samples were taken. I have nothing to add to what I said on the consular side. I would like to stress that the investigation in the United Kingdom is indeed independent of the government. On selective adherence to the OPCW or the Chemical Weapons Convention, we are a State party in very good standing.

On Porton Down, we, the UK does not possess chemical weapons. Porton Down is a defensive establishment. It conducts research. It provides scientific and technical support to the UK government in relation to protection against chemical weapons. Protective research is permitted under the Chemical Weapons Convention. Porton Down is in full compliance with the Convention and it is subject to regular inspection by OPCW and any member state is invited, is able, to conduct an inspection at any time. We received 16 questions from the Russian Federation under Article IX, Mr President, of the [CWC]. The rules and articles of the [CWC] make it clear that we have 10 days to respond and we will respond, Mr President.

On President Putin, I am happy to clarify that I was referring to the early 2000s. On Litvenenko, the polonium trail literally led all the way back to Russia. I repeat something I've said before, Mr President; we respect Russia as a country, we have no quarrel with the Russian people but will always speak out against Russian authorities' reckless and illegal behaviour whether it takes place in Syria or it takes place in Salisbury.

Finally Mr President, when it gets to Christmas I would like to buy my colleague the Russian Ambassador a subscription to an English book club but as it isn't Christmas allow me to return the literary favour today. The Russian account of UK behaviour and what is happening on the ground in either Salisbury or Syria is a rewrite of George Orwell's 1984, updated for the modern day and modern Russian methods.

Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/russian-account-of-salisbury-is-a-re-write-of-orwells-1984>