

OPCW Executive Council meeting: 18 April update on the use of a nerve agent in Salisbury

Update by Peter Wilson, UK Permanent Representative to the OPCW, following the OPCW Technical Secretariat's assistance to the UK after the Salisbury attack.

Thank you Chair. The United Kingdom asked the Chair convene this meeting today to enable the Technical Secretariat to update us all on its technical assistance visit to the United Kingdom. At the Executive Council in March I also promised to keep the Council informed of progress in our investigation into the use of a chemical weapon in Salisbury on 4 March 2018.

First, I really do want to express to the Director General my government's gratitude for the support the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has provided. The OPCW responded promptly to our request to send their experts to the UK. They conducted a highly professional mission. The OPCW's Designated Laboratories have also responded professionally and promptly. What the Director General said was really important on this, and the Technical Secretariat's presentation shows how professional that work was. The report the Technical Secretariat presented to us on 11 April was thorough and methodical. The Secretariat responded quickly to our request to share that report with all States Parties. All have had the chance to see the quality of that work.

The United Kingdom is grateful for the many acts of support and solidarity from delegations in this room, and from organisations and governments around the world.

As you know, on 4 March Yulia and Sergei Skripal were poisoned in Salisbury, England, with a chemical weapon, which UK experts established to be a Novichok. OPCW has now clearly verified those findings. This is set out in paragraph 10 of the unclassified Executive Summary.

Before we talk about the report in detail, let me provide you with an update on events since we last briefed this Council on 4 April.

The Skripals were victims of a barbaric attack, and our top priority is their welfare. They have received the best possible care. We are glad to see improvements in both Yulia and Sergei Skripal's health. Yulia Skripal was discharged from hospital on 9 April. Her medical progress is testimony to the outstanding care she was given by medical staff in Salisbury.

The welcome, gradual, recovery of the Skripals does not alter the core facts of the case. This was attempted murder using a military grade nerve agent on the streets of the United Kingdom. The investigation now underway is one of the largest and most complex undertaken by British police. As a result of detailed forensic examination, detectives believe the Skripals first came into contact with the nerve agent at their home address.

My government announced on 17 April that decontamination work in Salisbury is starting this week. It will take some months to complete. In total 9 sites, including 3 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 harbour residual amounts of the agent; and chemical cleaning and retesting. All waste will be safely removed and incinerated. Each site will not be released until decontamination is complete.

Mr Chair, we promised to share the findings of the OPCW's Technical Assistance Visit with fellow States Parties. We asked the Technical Secretariat to circulate their report in full to all of you, without any redaction or amendment. The report that delegations here today have

received is the same report that the United Kingdom received. It is a demonstrably professional, meticulous and scientifically sound piece of work.

Our technical experts have studied the OPCW's report in detail. I will briefly touch on some important elements:

- firstly, the report sets out, in detail, the full forensic chain of custody over the collection, handling and transportation of the samples that OPCW staff maintained throughout. This assures us of the integrity and validity of the results. The Technical Secretariat went into some detail on this just now
- secondly, the OPCW used only their own equipment, so there could be no concern about contamination – accidental or deliberate
- thirdly, the environmental samples were analysed by 2 laboratories, and the biomedical samples by 2 separate laboratories. All 4 laboratories detected the presence of the nerve agent. And the findings show the stability of the toxic chemical, as the Technical Secretariat have just explained
- finally, the report notes the absence of any significant amounts of impurities in the chemicals detected: “high purity” is the description in paragraph 11 of the unclassified Executive Summary, as the Technical Secretariat have just explained today. This suggests that a highly sophisticated laboratory made the chemicals

Mr Chair, 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 of a type known as Novichok was used in Salisbury. The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), our laboratories at Porton Down established the highest concentrations of the agent were found on the handle of Mr Skripal's front door.

But of course, while the identification of the nerve agent used is an essential piece of technical evidence in our investigation, neither DSTL's analysis, nor the OPCW's report, identifies the country or laboratory of origin of the agent used in this attack. So let me also set out the wider picture, which leads the United Kingdom to assess that there is no plausible alternative explanation for what happened in Salisbury than Russian state responsibility. We believe that only Russia had the technical means, operational experience, and the motive to target the Skripals.

Let me set out clearly why we have reached that conclusion:

First, 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, known as Novichoks. The key institute responsible for this work was a branch of the State Institute for Organic Chemistry and Technology at Shikhany near Volgograd. The codeword 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 (CWC), it is likely that some Novichoks had passed acceptance testing, allowing their use by the Russian military. Russia's CWC declaration failed to report any work on Novichoks. Russia further developed

some Novichoks after ratifying the Convention. In the mid-2000s, President Putin was closely involved in the Russian chemical weapons programme. It is highly unlikely that any former Soviet republic (other than Russia) pursued an offensive chemical weapons programme after independence. It is unlikely that Novichoks could be made and deployed by non-state actors

Second, operational experience

- Russia has a proven record of conducting state-sponsored assassination. The Owen Report from the UK's public inquiry into the death of Aleksandr Litvinenko concluded in January 2016 that he was deliberately poisoned with Polonium 210. It was said that there was a "strong probability" that the FSB had directed the operation, and that President Putin "probably approved it". Commenting on other suspected assassinations between 2002 and 2006, Sir Robert Owen wrote: "These cases suggest that in the years prior to Mr Litvinenko's death, the Russian state may have been involved in the assassination of Mr Putin's critics" and that "the Russian state may have sponsored attacks against its opponents using poisons". Since 2006, there have been numerous suspected Russian state-sponsored assassinations outside the former Soviet Union
- 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 these weapons. This programme subsequently included investigation of ways of delivering nerve agents, including by application to door handles. Within the last decade, Russia has produced and stockpiled small quantities of novichoks under the same programme

Third, the motive

- Sergei Skripal was a former Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer, convicted of espionage in 2004. 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, dating back at least as far as 2013, when email accounts belonging to Yulia Skripal were targeted by GRU cyber specialists

Mr Chair, in the last 14 months, we have seen the use of chemical weapons in Syria, in Iraq, in Malaysia and now in the United Kingdom. This is a serious threat to the Convention. It is a threat to the rules based system, and therefore, a threat to every State Party. There is no place for chemical weapons use in the 21st century. Not anywhere. And certainly not by a State Party to this Convention.

These actions demand a response. There is an urgent need to act, collectively, to reinforce the prohibition against the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons. Those who choose to ignore these prohibitions, and use chemical weapons, should be identified and held to account – no matter who they are, or how long that may take. There can be no impunity.

Late on 13 April, the Russian Federation transmitted to the United Kingdom a list of questions under Article IX of the Convention. We will respond as soon as possible, within the 10 days stipulated in the Convention. We will share our response with all States Parties. Russia made a claim of urgency and requested an answer by 'no later than 17 April'. We regret Russia did not consider it urgent when we asked them for an explanation on 12 March. We have still to receive a formal response to our questions.

Instead, Russia has shown disdain for international law and for the work of the OPCW. Russia has staged a brazen disinformation campaign, and to attack the reputation and expertise of

the OPCW. They have sought to confuse, distract and brazenly misrepresent facts, despite the thorough, independent OPCW report, in line with best OPCW practice.

Before the Executive Council meeting on 4 April, the Russian Embassy in London tweeted “Russia will accept results of the OPCW Salisbury poisoning investigation only if Russian experts participate in it”. Most recently, Russia has suggested, erroneously, that the nerve agent identified was unstable and would quickly decompose, contrary to OPCW’s finding and as you have all just heard.

Over the past weekend, Foreign Minister Lavrov said that Russia had somehow obtained information to suggest that the chemical used was identified by a world-leading laboratory as BZ. In fact, the 4 OPCW-designated laboratories did not detect BZ in any of the samples collected in Salisbury. The Technical Secretariat have been very clear on that point, and the Director General very clear in his statement.

In 2000, under the umbrella of Article IX of the Convention, the UK asked a number of questions of Russia bilaterally, with a view to clarifying issues relating to its CWC declarations. We noted that Russia, as the legal successor to the Soviet Union, accepted legal responsibility for the Soviet offensive programme. The UK specifically asked Russia about the development of Novichok agents and whether Russia planned to include relevant information in its declarations to the OPCW. The Russian reply indicated Russia believed that there was no information which was required to be declared.

To date, Russia has proposed more than 30 contradictory and changing fantasies to explain the Salisbury attack. Russia’s actions to confuse and distract have not worked, but instead show how hard they are trying to hide the truth. We reiterate our call on Russia to meet its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, to end its offensive chemical weapons programme and to declare its programme of Novichoks.

We will continue to call out Russia’s reckless and indiscriminate behaviour when it violates this Convention, and when it threatens global security.

Mr Chair, the United Kingdom will live up to our promise to keep this Council informed of all significant developments in our investigation. When the investigation and legal processes in the United Kingdom have completed, we will brief States Parties on the outcome.

I request that this statement is issued as an official document of this meeting of the Executive Council and placed on the OPCW website.

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/opcw-executive-council-meeting-18-april-update-on-the-use-of-a-nerve-agent-in-salisbury>