

Commemorative meeting OPCW Ieper 21 april 2015

Speech by Mayor of Ypres Jan Durnez

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to welcome all of you on behalf of the municipality of Ypres. It is an honour for the city to host this commemorative meeting of the OPCW on the eve of the centenary of the first massive use of gas in warfare. Tomorrow it will be exactly a century since poison gas was used for the first time in world history as a weapon in war. The 22nd of April 1915 was the day chemical warfare was introduced and “weapons of mass destruction” were born. An officer of the Belgian Grenadier Regiment wrote in his diary: “Around 4 pm we hear the sounds of heavy shelling and we see a large cloud rising up in the direction of Steenstrate. All night long coughing French territorials arrive in our trenches, claiming that it is not acceptable that old family fathers be attacked with suffocating gases. What a hell!”

The disastrous consequences of chemical warfare were enormous. The chlorine gas killed thousands of people, and those who survived, lived with the consequences for the rest of their lives: blindness and chronic infections of the respiratory system are just some of the symptoms the victims had to endure.

But later on, the weapon became even more cruel and destructive. In 1917, mustard gas replaced the apparently less effective chlorine gas. The name “Yperite” was born, and our town Ieper is everything but proud to be at the origin of this name.

Still today, chemical weapons continue to threaten human lives in our region. Still every year, a part of the chemical ammunition used during the First World War, is found in the bottom of the Westhoek region. The danger that farmers will be surprised on their fields by the explosion of “old” but still dangerous ammunition lives on. We don’t want future generations in other countries as a result of other wars to experience the same threat. But, unfortunately we also note that almost a century later Chemical weapons are still used in warfare. The only way to release the future generations from this threat is full abolition.

On 20 May 1998, a delegation of our city had the honour to attend the inauguration of the Headquarters of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons at The Hague. The ceremony that brought us together, had a huge historical importance for all peace-loving nations,

and for the city of Ieper in particular. Since then, every year a delegation of the OPCW has attended the commemoration of the Armistice of the First World War in Ypres on 11 November. This demonstrates that the bond between the City of Ypres and the OPCW is particularly strong since the Organisation was installed. We sincerely hope that this will continue to be the case in the future.

Since the installation, you are efficiently and successfully playing a crucial role in the elimination of chemical weapons and in the promotion of peace and security. We strongly believe that the outstanding contribution of the OPCW toward chemical disarmament has brought a world without chemical weapons closer. The Nobel Peace Prize that was awarded to your organization in 2013 proves so. We are trustful that one day the world will be free from chemical weapons.

Let me end by underscoring once more that I feel honoured to host this extraordinary meeting of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in Ypres. On behalf of the City of Ieper, its inhabitants and all peace-loving peoples around the world, we wish the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons every possible success in its future work

Thank you,