Briefing to Security Council on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2118 (2013) on the elimination of the chemical weapons programme of the Syrian Arab Republic and update on the activities of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM)

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Mr. President, distinguished Members of the Security Council,
Thank you for this opportunity to brief you, for the first time in my capacity as the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2118 (2013) on the elimination of the chemical weapons programme of the Syrian Arab Republic. I will also provide you with an update on the activities of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).

I am pleased to be joined today by Mr. Edmond Mulet, who was appointed on 1 May 2017 by the Secretary-General as the Head of the JIM’s independent three-member panel. Although I will briefly inform you of the JIM’s current activities, Mr. Mulet will be able to answer any questions you might have, regarding the work of the JIM.

I also note that on 2 May 2017, Mr. Stefan Mögl was appointed as a member of the JIM Leadership Panel. Mr. Mögl will be based in the The Hague.

I will first turn to the progress related to resolution 2118 (2013) and the elimination of Syria’s declared chemical weapons programme.

I have discussed these issues with the Director-General of the OPCW on several occasions, and he has provided valuable updates on and insight into OPCW’s activities. The working-level engagement between the Office for Disarmament Affairs and the OPCW remains positive and proactive.

I have also engaged with the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations, as well as with most of you, the Members of the Council. These discussions have strengthened my understanding of the circumstances and the ways in which they are evolving.

Mr. President,
As the Secretary-General’s last letter notes, the situation with regard to the destruction of the chemical weapons production facilities remains unchanged. The OPCW Technical Secretariat has verified the destruction of 24 out of 27 declared production facilities. However, the
prevailing security situation continues to preclude safe access to three remaining sites, consisting of one aircraft hangar and two above-ground stationary facilities.

The work to address unresolved issues related to Syria’s declaration and subsequent amendments had been expected to move forward with the resumption of high-level consultations in The Hague.

Three rounds of such consultations had previously taken place between April and June 2016, with the aim of resolving all outstanding issues related to Syria’s declaration. The OPCW Director-General then submitted a report to the OPCW Executive Council in July 2016, which noted that those issues remained unresolved and which urged a change in approach by the Syrian Arab Republic.

In March this year, the Director-General sent a letter to the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic, H.E. Mr. Faisal Mekdad, inviting him and his delegation to resume these high level consultations in early May. However, it was decided that these consultations should be temporarily postponed, in order to ensure that the discussions would be as fruitful and productive as possible. New dates for the resumption of the high level consultations have not yet been decided upon.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly encouraged the cooperation between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the OPCW on resolving these outstanding issues.

Mr. President,

I turn now to the work of the OPCW fact-finding mission (FFM) in Syria. Since the time of the last briefing to the Council on this issue, two reports of the fact-finding mission were transmitted to the Secretary-General by the Director-General and subsequently circulated to the Security Council.

Firstly, on 2 May 2017, the Director-General transmitted the “Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of 16 September 2016.” This report was

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produced further to an investigation by an FFM team into an allegation of the use of chemical weapons in the area of Um Hosh, in the Aleppo countryside, on 16 September 2016.

Following a request for an investigation, by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, an OPCW FFM team deployed to Damascus on two occasions: from 11 to 19 December 2016 and from 6 to 12 January 2017. During these two deployments, the team conducted interviews, collected testimonies and reviewed documents and other information provided by Syrian authorities. Due to the prevailing security situation, the FFM team was not able to visit the site of the alleged incident.

The FFM team also reviewed blood sample analyses of two female casualties reported to have been involved in the alleged attack. The analyses indicated that they had been exposed to sulfur mustard. In addition, the FFM team conducted a non-destructive evaluation and sampling of a mortar reported to be connected to the alleged incident. This mortar was handed over to the team by experts of the Russian Federation’s Chemical, Biological, Nuclear and Radiological (CBRN) Team. Laboratory analysis indicated that this mortar contained sulfur mustard.

The Secretary-General has also circulated to the Security Council a letter from the OPCW Director-General, attaching a status update of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding a Reported Incident in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April this year.

After having undertaken a preliminary assessment, an FFM team was mobilised to investigate the incident. The team was deployed to a neighbouring country, wherein it conducted interviews with casualties and witnessed the collection of biomedical samples from casualties from the alleged incident. The team also received biological-environmental samples from dead animals reported to have been close to the site of the incident and received environmental samples from close to the suspected impact point. The team attended the autopsies of three alleged victims, witnessed the extraction of bio-medical samples from those bodies and received the autopsy reports.

As the Director-General has announced already, the analysis of samples showed exposure to sarin or a sarin-like substance.
This is not a final report; there is still work to be done. The FFM team has collected information and conducted interviews, and all materials and information are currently being analysed.

The Director-General also indicated to me that the FFM team is planning for a possible visit to Khan Shaykhun. As you are aware, Khan Shaykhun is not under Government control. In an exchange of letters, the OPCW Director-General requested, on 29 April, the support of the United Nations in the form of security, logistical and operational assistance. On 4 May, the Secretary-General, in his letter of reply, indicated his willingness to provide such support, and indicated that planning within relevant offices of the United Nations Secretariat was already underway.

In this regard, I remain in regular contact with the Director-General, in order to help ensure that any visit to the site, by the FFM team, would be accompanied by the most stringent security assurances.

Mr. President,
I will speak very briefly on the work of the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism.

Since our recent respective appointments, Mr. Mulet and I have been in regular contact, and we intend to ensure a smooth coordination between the Office for Disarmament Affairs and the JIM. The Office for Disarmament Affairs fully supports the work of the JIM, and also fully respects its independence.

The JIM has been provided with the two recent reports of the OPCW FFM, of which I just spoke. I am informed that the Mechanism is now studying these reports and will keep the Security Council informed of its next steps.

In addition, the Mechanism will reach out for information of interest to its investigation, as was done in the past. In his letter to the Security Council of 28 April, the Secretary-General called upon all States to support the critical OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism. I likewise call upon all to support the Mechanism’s important task and extend their full cooperation.
Mr. President, distinguished Members of the Council,

We must not allow ourselves to become inured to the ongoing allegations of the use of chemical weapons. This is an issue about which the United Nations cannot be neutral. The use of chemical weapons by any party, government forces, terrorist groups or armed opposition groups for that matter, cannot and will not be justified -- regardless of provocation or of circumstances. Their re-emergence is indefensible and cannot be viewed as anything other than a violation of the most basic international law and a serious deviation from the internationally agreed broader path towards the goal of a world free of chemical weapons. As such, this is not an issue to be politicized. The international community must have confidence that this goal is one that remains within our reach, and that those who stand in its way will be identified and held accountable. Its importance is greater than ever.

Thank you very much for your attention.