

Statement on U.S. Airstrikes and the Syrian Chemical Weapons Attack

Early this morning, 7 April, the United States government took unilateral military action against the armed forces of the Syrian government. The United States has stated that the airstrikes were in direct response to a 4 April chemical weapons attack by Syrian government forces on the town of Khan Shaykhun in Idlib province. That attack killed at least 86 people, including 28 children. Eyewitness reports, videos and photographic evidence appear to show victims suffering from symptoms consistent with severe exposure to a nerve agent, such as sarin gas.

Khan Shaykhun is the deadliest chemical weapons attack to take place in Syria since August 2013, when more than 1,000 people were killed in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta during a sarin attack. Despite the Syrian government subsequently agreeing to surrender its chemical weapons, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Joint Investigative Mechanism (OPCW-JIM), mandated by the UN Security Council, has determined that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons on at least three occasions since then.

The prohibition of chemical weapons is one of the oldest norms of the international community, dating back to 1899. The Geneva Protocol of 1925 reinforced the strict prohibition of chemical weapons. Chemical weapons remain inherently immoral, indiscriminate and illegal. Using them constitutes a war crime.

The previous failure of the Security Council to act in relation to the findings of the OPCW-JIM has encouraged the normalization of chemical warfare in Syria. As the attack on Khan Shaykhun demonstrates, six double vetoes by Russia and China in the Security Council have shielded perpetrators and created a climate of impunity.

We are conscious of the fact that last night's airstrike was a response to the fundamental failure of the UN Security Council to uphold its responsibilities under the UN Charter and to adopt measures that would have constrained those who use chemical weapons to terrorize, poison and kill defenseless men, women and children. However, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect does not condone unilateral military action outside of international law.

In this context, the pursuit of justice via the Impartial, Independent, International Investigative Mechanism for Syria, established by the UN General Assembly, remains essential. The international community must hold all those in Syria who use chemical weapons, and commit other atrocities, accountable under international law, regardless of their position or affiliation. All UN member states, including the United States, should also enable Syrian refugees fleeing from these atrocities to find sanctuary in their countries.

Six years of conflict, atrocities, displacement and international division have delivered nothing but misery for the people of Syria. Despite inevitable diplomatic tensions arising from recent events, the entire Security Council should now work to protect civilians, prevent further military escalation, and take proximate steps to end the civil war once and for all.