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Leading International Voices and Chemical Weapons Experts Call for Accountability and Transparency at the OPCW

After nearly two years of controversy surrounding the 2018 alleged chemical weapon attack in Douma, Syria, involving repeated leaks and protests by dissenting OPCW scientists, a Statement of Concern was sent to the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) (and copied to delegations of all 193 member states) calling for transparency and accountability at the Organisation. Signatories in support include 25 internationally respected persons among them OPCW’s first Director General, former OPCW inspectors and two former UN Assistant Secretaries-General.

In April 2018, approximately 50 civilians were allegedly killed in a chemical weapons attack in the town of Douma, Syria. Within a week, the US, British and French Governments had carried out retaliatory airstrikes based upon the assertion that the Syrian government was responsible for the alleged attack and before an OPCW investigation had been conducted. The OPCW deployed a Fact Finding Mission (FFM) shortly after the alleged attack and issued a first interim report in the Summer of 2018 and a Final Report on March 1 2019. The final report found there were reasonable grounds to believe chlorine had been used as a weapon and implied that the attack had been carried out by the Syrian Air Force.

Controversy quickly ensued with the leaking of an internal OPCW engineering study which cast doubt on the official version. The OPCW initiated an internal investigation to identify who had leaked the engineering study. Late in 2019, a former OPCW official detailed major scientific and procedural irregularities to a panel hosted by the Courage Foundation in October 2019.

Since then, multiple documents have been published via WikiLeaks and The Grayzone whilst the OPCW leak investigation failed to identify the source of the engineering study leak but instead castigated two of its former scientists who had raised concerns about the FFM investigation. Two Arria formula meetings of the UN Security Council have included statements from a former OPCW scientist whilst formal UN Security Council meetings have seen a statement of concern read on behalf of the first Director General Jose Bustani (UNSC, 5 October 2020) and direct questioning of the OPCW Director General Fernando Arias (UNSC, 11 December 2020). In late 2020, in an apparent attempt to smear one of its former scientists, a letter was leaked from the OPCW to the open source investigation organisation known as Bellingcat. It subsequently transpired that the leak story published by Bellingcat was in fact incorrect and possibly a consequence of deliberate disinformation.
The purpose of the initiative to request transparency and accountability from the OPCW has four underlying reasons: 1. To restore the credibility and trust in a major international organisation and to protect its independence, 2. to protest over the deliberate redaction of evidence in the Douma case and a failure to conduct a credible and transparent investigation; 3. to express the serious concern that the incident of Douma has become yet another example of fraudulent manipulation of facts to justify political and military actions reminiscent of the earlier fabricated story about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq which was used to justify a war; 4. to protect civil society in Syria and, ultimately, elsewhere from future suffering.

In view of the seriousness of this on-going controversy, the Statement of Concern calls upon the OPCW to act responsibly in order to ‘restore’ its ‘credibility and integrity’.

The Statement of Concern has been sent to the OPCW Director General and all OPCW state parties, the UN Secretary General, the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, and other UN entities.

Press Inquiries should be addressed to the ‘The Berlin Group 21’ care of ‘The Courage Foundation’ at courage.contact@couragefound.org or Nathan.fuller@couragefound.org

The Statement of Concern and Supporting Signatories can be read here.

Additional Background information provided by the Berlin Group can be read here.

Translations into German, French, Arabic and Spanish are available here.