

MEDIA RELEASE

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OPCW commemorating the victims of chemical weapons on 21 April 2015 in Ypres, Belgium

Green Cross Switzerland is urging the CWC member states to accept more responsibility for civilians in Syria and in Iraq.

Modern chemical weapons have been produced and used in armed conflicts for the past 100 years. At the present time, it is the civilian population of Syria that is suffering from the detrimental impact of this. On 21 August 2013 the Ghouta residential area outside of Damascus was the target of a chemical weapons attack where an estimated 1400 civilians were killed and scores more were injured. In 2014, under pressure of the international community, the Syrian government agreed to the destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which oversees the adherence to the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). However, the civilian population in the Ghouta suburbs, which remain under siege to this day, did not receive any meaningful international aid.

In some areas located in the midst of the war zone epidemics, such as typhoid, hepatitis A and tuberculosis have broken out causing a serious medical emergency situation. The civilian population, numbering approximately 500,000 people, has been severely weakened by the ongoing military conflict. In view of the disastrous medical care available in the region, Green Cross launched an emergency aid project in 2014, hand in hand with its partner organisations in Iraq and Syria, Wadi and Al-Seeraj, to supply urgently needed medication. "However, the people are in ill health and traumatised and need a great deal more support" according to Nathalie Gysi, Executive Director of Green Cross Switzerland. In addition to the international efforts to enforce the prohibition of all weapons of mass destruction, she is urging the CWC member states to contribute adequately to ensure proper care for the civilians in need in Syria. An amount of just USD 100,000 pays for two urgently needed medical centres in East Ghouta.

With its "Legacy of the Cold War" disarmament programme, Green Cross Switzerland promotes the safe and environmentally friendly elimination of nuclear and chemical weapons. The major challenges of this programme are the expansion of the non-proliferation treaty into a nuclear disarmament treaty and the universality of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The "Social and Medical Care" programme supports the civilian population in areas with radioactive and chemical contamination by helping them to help themselves. On 21 April 2015 the OPCW will hold a commemoration in Ypres, Belgium to remember the 100-year history of chemical warfare, honour its victims and celebrate the realisation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. As an NGO Green Cross works closely with the OPCW and its member states and actively supports the destruction of chemical weapons. On the occasion of the 100-year commemoration, it should be emphasised that in addition to destroying the chemical weapons, the CWC member states need to accept more responsibility for the civilian population in Syria and in Iraq.

Study to shed light on the long-term effects of the Halabja gas attack

Since early 2008 Green Cross has supported social and medical aid projects in the Halabja region of northern Iraq, which gained notoriety after the deadly gas attacks ordered by the Saddam Hussein regime in 1988. The projects focus on the long-term effects on the sociological, psychological and physical health caused by these chemical attacks. About ten

years ago it was found that some areas of Halabja have an unusually high rate of miscarriages and deformities in newborns. The cancer rate is also significantly higher than in other areas of northern Iraq where no chemical weapons attacks occurred. The local population is convinced that their food, drinking water, soil and cattle are still contaminated by the poison gas to this day. As a result, the people are worried and the absence of facts makes it impossible to respond properly. Therefore, Green Cross is planning to conduct a study on the effects on health and ecology following the use of chemical weapons in the Halabja region. This will finally enable the people of Halabja to find out with certainty what the actual state of their environment is and, depending on the results of the study they will also be informed of potential risks and how to prevent them.

History of chemical weapons

Chemical substances were used in warfare as far back as the Antiquity. However, 22 April 1915 is considered to be the birth of modern chemical weapons, when a German chlorine gas attack near Ypres left 5000 dead and 10,000 injured by chemical burns. Negotiations of a chemical weapons treaty began in the late 1960s, but it was not until 13 January 1993 that the "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction" (Chemical Weapons Convention, CWC) was signed in Paris. The CWC will remain in force for an indefinite period and it is the most progressive global disarmament agreement to date. Some of its elements will therefore be incorporated into future conventions on biological and nuclear weapons. When the Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force on 29 April 1997 the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is responsible for the implementation of the CWC, went to work in Den Haag. The OPCW is given a confidential declaration by each member state on industrial plants potentially capable of producing chemical weapons and on any past offensive weapons development programmes. Based on these declarations the OPCW oversees the destruction of any chemical weapons stockpiles and production facilities that may exist and regularly inspects the declared industrial plants that could potentially produce chemical weapons.

The CWC currently has 190 member states. Six countries have not joined the convention so far and some of these are suspected of stockpiling chemical weapons and of having the necessary know-how to produce them.

Green Cross Switzerland is committed to conquering the long-term effects of industrial and military disasters and the pollution from the period of the Cold War. Top priorities are the improvement of the quality of life of people impacted by chemical, radioactive and other kinds of contamination and the promotion of sustainable advancements in the spirit of cooperation instead of confrontation.

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