

The Chemical Disarmament and the United States

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Summary

The United States, having been the sole country indicating its struggle to eliminate its declared chemical weapons within the set timeframe, declared on July 7 that it had successfully destroyed the last munition in its outdated stockpile of such weapons. This accomplishment marked the meeting of a revised deadline that had been extended multiple times. The significance of eradicating this final unit of chemical arsenals lies in the restoration of the Chemical Weapons Convention's legitimacy and credibility. Doubters from various groups had been raising concerns about a member state of the CWC failing to fulfill its fundamental obligation.

On July 7, 2023, finally, the world finally received the much-awaited news that the last unit of remaining declared chemical weapons had been eliminated. The US was the country to do so. The other countries, that had declared their chemical arsenals, had already reported the completion of the destruction of their arsenals. The US was the only country that had expressed its inability to complete the destruction of its declared chemical weapons on time. On July 7, it announced: “The final munition in the nation’s obsolete stockpile of chemical weapons has been safely destroyed.”¹ So, finally, it met the revised deadline, which was extended a few times. What is the significance of the elimination of this last unit of chemical arsenals?

As of 7 July 2023



Stockpile Destruction

World’s declared chemical weapons stockpiles destroyed: 100%

Total declared stockpiles of chemical agents: 72,304 metric tonnes

Total destroyed stockpiles of chemical agents: 72,304 metric tonnes

Source: <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/opcw-numbers>



Chemical Weapons Production Facilities (CWPF)

Declared: 97

Destroyed: 74

Converted for peaceful purpose: 23

Remaining inspectable facilities/sites: 4

States with inspectable facilities/sites: 3

Inspections since EIF: 523

Source: <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/opcw-numbers>

The legitimacy and credibility of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is restored. Sceptics belonging to different communities were questioning the non-fulfilment of the basic obligation by a member state of the CWC. All the members of the convention are supposed to destroy their chemical arsenals. As per Article 1.2 of the CWC “Each State Party undertakes to destroy chemical weapons it owns or possesses, or that are located in any place under its jurisdiction or control, in accordance with the provisions of this Convention.”² The Article 1.4 demands from a state party “to destroy any chemical weapons production facilities it owns or possesses, or that are located in any place under its jurisdiction or control”³

Under Article IV of the CWC, each member state declared whether it possessed a chemical arsenal. If a country possessed chemical weapons, it had to declare the

‘aggregate quantity of each chemical declared’. The country also had to declare the exact sites of its chemical weapons stowage facilities. Each facility’s inventory was also to be declared under the CWC. The Convention details other steps and provisions regarding the declaration of chemical munitions.

Part V of the CWC has a provision for the submission of general plans for destruction. This part requires that the state party of the CWC submit their annual plans and reports for destruction. It also talks about general tenets for the destruction of chemical weapons production facilities. Article 6 in this part lays down that “For each chemical weapons production facility, a State Party shall supply the following information: Envisaged time-frame for measures to be taken; and Methods of destruction”

For ‘detailed plans for destruction’ of chemical weapons, Article 32 of part V lays down “Not less than 180 days before the destruction of a chemical weapons production facility starts, a State Party shall provide to the Technical Secretariat the detailed plans for destruction of the facility, including proposed measures for verification of destruction ... with respect to, inter alia: Timing of the presence of the inspectors at the facility to be destroyed; and Procedures for verification of measures to be applied to each item on the declared inventory.” The subsequent article 33 has other related details. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the institution set up for the implementation of the CWC coordinated the destruction process and dealt with the deadline(s) with the chemical weapons possessor countries.

As mentioned, a member state, under the CWC, is obliged to declare whether it has chemical arsenals or not. As discussed, the

CWC has several articles devoted to describing the declared arsenals. A few members declared that they had possessed chemical arsenals, and gradually started destroying their arsenals. India, Libya, Russia, the US, South Korea and Albania were the countries that had filed declarations for possessing chemical weapons in the first batch. Later, Iraq and Syria were added to the list and their arsenals were also destroyed. As of December 31, 2021, all eight countries—Albania, India, Iraq, Libya, Russia, Syria, and the US, which disclosed their chemical arsenals had a total of 72,304.343 metric tons of Category 1 and Category 2 chemical weapons, along with 417,833 items of Category 3 chemical weapons.⁴

The CWC obligated these countries except Syria (which joined the Convention later and resultantly, declared its arsenals late) to destroy their arsenals within 10 years of the entry into force of the convention. The original deadline for the complete destruction of chemical weapons for all the possessor countries who had declared their stockpiles was April 29, 2007. When the destruction process started, the chemical weapons countries started finding complications in destroying their arsenals. These countries realised their inability to complete the destruction process as per the schedule. They assessed that they would miss the deadline. The countries that felt like missing the deadline asked for the deadline. Assessing the requirements, the OPCW extended the deadline which was different for different countries. The US, Russia and Libya had to complete their destruction process by April 29, 2012.

The US and the Destruction of its Chemical Stockpile

The US along with Russia was known in the world as the possessor of chemical weapons.

Other countries made the world know about their arsenals as part of their obligations to the CWC. Russia and the US were also the largest possessors of chemical weapons in the world. In fact, the two countries missed even the new deadline—April 29, 2012. They cited the large chemical weapons stockpiles and associated complications as the primary reason for missing the deadline. By 2023, Russia destroyed all the chemical weapons from its stockpile.

The US took a long to complete the task. It had been given another extension to complete the destruction work by 2023, which eventually it did. The Chemical Demilitarization (Chem-Demil) Programme, which had been started in 1985 by the US government, was entrusted with the task of destroying the US chemical weapons stockpile exceeding 31,000 tons. The US government claims that the country had begun the process of chemical weapons destruction in 1990 even before the CWC was concluded in 1992 or entered into force in 1997. The Chem-Demil later gave way to the Chemical Materials Agency. The agency along with the Assembled Chemical Weapons Alternatives mainly undertook the destruction work of chemical weapons through incineration and neutralisation afterwards.

As the chemical arsenals were to be destroyed in different phases, the US struggled to complete the intermediate stage and had to take an extension. It was given an extension to complete the intermediate phase destruction by December 2017. It was supposed to destroy 45 per cent of its stockpile by 2004. However, the US government informed that despite all difficulties, it was able to destroy 8,691 tonnes of chemical weapons which constituted 27.6 percent of the American chemical weapons stockpile by March 2004.

The US succeeded in destroying 45 per cent of its arsenals by December 2007.⁵

The General Accounting Office (GAO) records: “The delays stem from incidents during operations, environmental permitting issues, concerns about emergency preparedness, and unfunded requirements.”⁶ However, the same report also puts the blame on the management structure of the programmes which had been assigned the responsibility of destroying the chemical weapons stockpile.

The US’s inability to destroy the chemical weapons stockpile and not meeting the deadlines had raised several doubts in the international community. The US went for massive confidence-building measures and Public relations exercises over the years to instil confidence and allay apprehensions in the international community. The delegation after delegation visited the last remaining sites to know the status. Through these goodwill visits the US conveyed its seriousness about the chemical weapons stockpile destruction to the world. The OPCW, too, helped it by publishing the gradual destruction of its chemical stockpile in its different reports. Even the team from OPCW and its member states visited the chemical weapons sites and provided their feedback.

Now the international community has entered into a new phase. Even if it is not a post-chemical disarmament phase, certainly, it is now a post-destruction phase. The destruction of the chemical stockpile was the most important task for the OPCW to fulfil the mandate of the CWC, which has other provisions, too. That chemical rearmament does not take place is being talked about. Related to it is the apprehension of terrorists acquiring low-technology, low-cost options in chemical agents. The member states of

the CWC are to be extended assistance for chemical security and safety.

However, equally significant is the task of international cooperation for peaceful uses of chemistry. During negotiations for the treaty, international economic and technological development cooperation figured quite prominently. The CWC has an article XI for the purpose. After the destruction, the OPCW and the member countries need to focus on implementing Article XI of the Convention. In fact, the global south has been quite vociferous in demanding the implementation of the treaty. In the past, the OPCW organised a few workshops and meetings to implement the articles. Now the developed countries led by the US need to become active to promote international cooperation for peaceful chemistry.

Thus, the destruction of the last chemical weapons has reposed faith in the multilaterally negotiated disarmament instrument. Multilateralism along with the spirit of international cooperation has triumphed. The tool of verification- a salient feature of the CWC may be used to reassure the world that there is no chemical rearmament. All the member states may have to work towards it. Similarly, the spectre of chemical terrorism is also to be countered unitedly by the member countries. The post-destruction phase is not the end of the OPCW or the CWC. It is going to set new priorities and challenges. The international community should brace itself for it.

Endnotes:

¹ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3451920/us-completes-chemical-weapons-stockpile-destruction-operations/>

- ² <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/article-i>
- ³ <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/article-i>
- ⁴ <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022/12/c2704%28e%29.pdf>
- ⁵ https://www.army.mil/article/3736/u_s_army_reaches_45_chemical_weapons_convention_destruction_milestone
- ⁶ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-04-634t.pdf>