Switzerland’s commitment to chemical weapons disarmament

Approximately 70,000 tonnes of declared chemical weapons are stockpiled throughout the world, most of which are leftovers from the Cold War era.

In 1993 the international community finalised the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) with the aim of destroying these stockpiles. Although a certain amount of progress has been made, fully implementing this convention is proving to be problematic, mainly because the Russian Federation – which possesses the largest stocks of chemical weapons – is finding it difficult to meet the stated deadline.

As a signatory state of the CWC, Switzerland is contributing around 17 million Swiss francs in support of projects aimed at destroying stockpiles of chemical weapons in Russia and certain other countries.

Furthermore, its involvement in the “Global Partnership” against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction reinforces its commitment in this area.

The signing of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) by the international community in 1993 represented a breakthrough in the area of global disarmament. Since this is the only existing agreement that regulates the total destruction of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction, all the states party to the CWC have an interest in the dismantling of these weapons, and this interest is being pursued in the Global Partnership against chemical weapons.

It is not easy to destroy chemical weapons, and Russia is finding it difficult to meet the stated deadline.

Chemical weapons stockpiles in Russia

The majority of the declared world-wide total of around 70,000 tonnes of chemical weapons are stockpiled within the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation. Here, some 40,000 tonnes are stored at seven sites, and with the exception of Shchuch’ye, all of these are situated in the European region, i.e. west of the Ural Mountains.

**Blister agents**

The Gorny and Kambarka sites contain approximately 7,500 tonnes of yperit (mustard gas) and lewisite, or mixtures thereof. These agents cause severe burns upon skin contact or inhalation. At the two above-mentioned sites they are stored in large tanks (50 cubic metres) and barrels, and are therefore not weaponised.

Kisner is the only site at which a small quantity of ammunition is stored that has been armed with these agents.

**Nerve gas**

More than 32,000 tonnes of nerve gas are stored at Kisner and the other four depots (Shchuch’ye, Maradikova, Potseb and Leonidova). Depending on the type of substance, nerve gases cause paralysis following inhalation or skin contact, and usually result in death. Stockpiles of nerve gas exist in Shchuch’ye and Kisner in the form of artillery ammunition, and in Maradikova, Leonidova and Potseb in the form of aircraft bombs and spray tanks.

Definition of chemical weapons

In accordance with the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the term “chemical weapons” encompasses not only toxic substances, but also ammunition and material associated with their deployment. Chemical weapons belong to the same category as biological and nuclear weapons, i.e. they are classified as weapons of mass destruction that cause major damage or indiscriminately kill both civilians and members of armed forces.
Switzerland considers it to be of great importance to international security.

The CWC

The CWC prohibits the development, production, possession, sale and use of chemical weapons. It stipulates that signatory states have to declare any existing stocks and destroy them under international supervision, and calls for all declared stocks to be destroyed by 2007 if possible, though by 2012 at the latest.

Supervision and verification

The signatories established an independent body – the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) – which is based in The Hague and is responsible for supervising and verifying the implementation of the convention. 152 countries have ratified the CWC since it came into effect in 1997. Five countries have declared that they possess chemical weapons, namely the USA, Russia, India, South Korea and Albania. Russia possesses the greatest quantity of chemical weapons, with a declared total of 40,000 tonnes (versus the global total of 70,000 tonnes).

Sluggish implementation of the CWC

To date, less than 1% - approximately 7000 tonnes - of the declared stocks of chemical weapons have been destroyed. Nonetheless, the process of chemical weapons disarmament is proceeding rather sluggishly. While the USA, Russia, India and South Korea are destroying their stockpiles more or less on schedule and the only recently declared stocks in Albania are relatively insignificant, this process has been delayed in the Russian Federation due to economic and financial problems. In view of this, various countries – and in particular the USA – have offered Russia additional support in the area of chemical weapons destruction. At the same time, the Russian government has intensified its efforts to comply with the CWC and has recently drawn up a more streamlined disarmament plan.

Switzerland’s support for Russia

Switzerland firmly adheres to the principle that, as stipulated in the CWC, responsibility for disarmament lies with those countries that produced the chemical weapons. However, for reasons relating to security and environmental protection it is also in Switzerland’s own interest to share in the commitment on the part of the international community and support the destruction of chemical weapons in Russia and elsewhere.

Green Cross

The DFA’s first step towards supporting Russia with its chemical weapons disarmament took the form of a financial contribution amounting to 3 million Swiss Francs to the Chemtrust project initiated by Green Cross, a non-government organisation that sets out to eliminate weapons left over from the Cold War era. The purpose of Chemtrust is to launch campaigns aimed at promoting acceptance of chemical weapons disarmament by the general population and local administration.

Framework credit

In addition, the Federal Council responded to a motion put forward by a member of the Council of States in September 2002 by submitting a bill to Parliament calling for a framework credit of 17 million Swiss Francs to support chemical weapons disarmament throughout the world.

Financial support will be focused on projects primarily in Russia and where possible by means of a direct contribution to chemical weapons destruction. Since Russia’s precise needs in this area have not been fully identified, Switzerland wants to keep a number of options open relating to support projects. In March 2003, Parliament unanimously approved the law that provides for this credit line.

“Global Partnership”

Switzerland is strengthening its commitment to chemical weapons disarmament by participating in the “Global Partnership” against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (cf. box). This opens up an opportunity for Switzerland to more efficiently co-ordinate its efforts to promote global chemical weapons disarmament with other donor nations.

New threat

In recent years we have witnessed the development of a new threat, namely the procurement and use of toxic chemical substances – that are both easier and cheaper to produce than nuclear weapons – by non-state actors. As a consequence, it is even more important that the relevant regulations are tightened, existing stocks are destroyed and the international community works more closely together to combat this threat.

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Reactions by the international community

The 1st Gulf War underscored the dangers of uncontrolled proliferation of chemical weapons, and prompted the international community to introduce an effective legislative mechanism that would not only secure area control, but would also lead to the definitive elimination of such weapons. These efforts culminated in the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993, which subsequently came into effect in 1997.

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