

Testimony of Assistant Secretary Thomas M. Countryman on the Efforts of the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to Accomplish the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing: Syria

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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and Members of the Committee; thank you for the opportunity to testify today about international efforts to support the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in the complete and verifiable elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons program. While we have made important progress in the past months toward the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons program, considerable work remains to be done to ensure the Asad regime can never again use these terrible weapons against its own people, or threaten our regional and international partners with them.

Just last year, the regime did not even publicly acknowledge that it possessed chemical weapons, despite having used them on multiple occasions, including in attacks that killed over 1,400 people. Today, OPCW inspectors on the ground in Syria, with UN support, have conducted full inspections of Syria's declared chemical weapons-related sites, and have verified the functional

destruction of the chemical weapons production, mixing, and filling equipment at those sites. In addition, as of today, more than 49 percent of Syria's declared chemical weapons materials slated for destruction outside of Syria have been removed, including all of Syria's declared sulfur mustard agent, and the OPCW has verified the destruction in Syria of 93 percent of Syria's declared isopropanol, a binary component of the nerve agent sarin. But that's not good enough. Syria has yet to remove 65 percent of its most dangerous (Priority 1) declared chemicals. We must continue to work with the international community to maintain pressure on the Asad regime to remove all of these chemicals as urgently as possible.

The international community has established a firm legal framework, through UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2118 and decisions of the OPCW Executive Council, to ensure that this immense undertaking is completed in a transparent, expeditious, and verifiable manner, with a target for destroying all of Syria's declared chemicals by June 30 of this year.

The progress made in the past months has been achieved by diplomacy backed by a willingness to use military force. It remains critically important, as this process continues, that members of the international community continue to monitor closely the Syrian regime's compliance with its Chemical Weapons

Convention (CWC)-related obligations. Syria's obligations are clear, and we will continue to underscore the importance of the Asad regime's continued cooperation. The Security Council decided in UNSCR 2118 to impose Chapter VII measures in the event of non-compliance with the resolution.

While we have made progress, the task before us remains considerable. After months of Syrian foot dragging, we have made clear to the Asad regime that the internationally agreed upon schedule for chemical weapons destruction is simply not up for negotiation; the regime has all the equipment that it needs and has run out of excuses. We remain focused on underscoring the need for Syria to move forward rapidly with transporting chemical weapons materials to the port of Latakia for removal, consistent with its responsibilities under the CWC and UNSCR 2118. The next few weeks are critical in the removal effort, and we and the rest of the world are watching. We have, of course, also been in contact with Syrian opposition leaders, updating them throughout this process, and confirming their commitment that they will not interfere with the activities of the international elimination effort.

With the continuing support of the international community, and the dedicated commitment of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission, we believe the Syrians are

capable of completing the removal effort by late April. The international community continues to work toward the June 30 target date for the complete elimination of the program. While Syrian delays have placed that timeline in some danger, we continue to believe they remain achievable.

The path ahead is not an easy one. Syria has missed several intermediate target dates, including most recently the target date for the destruction of chemical weapons production facilities. The regime must meet all chemical weapons destruction obligations, including for the physical destruction of chemical weapons production facilities, consistent with the CWC. The OPCW is currently advising Syria on an appropriate facilities destruction plan. It is essential that Syria accept its recommendations, and submit a revised facilities destruction plan for consideration by the OPCW Executive Council at its next scheduled meeting.

The United States and the international community have provided extensive assistance to the international effort to eliminate the Syrian chemical weapons program. There are no more excuses on the part of the Asad regime for not meeting the agreed timeline. We continue to encourage all countries to make whatever contribution they can to this important undertaking – whether that contribution is financial, technical, or in-kind – to enable the OPCW and UN to

complete their missions. The United States has led by example in providing tens of millions of dollars in assistance to the OPCW-UN Joint Mission, including the provision of containers, trucks, forklifts and other materials necessary for the safe transportation of chemical weapons materials in Syria. The State Department's Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund has provided eight million dollars in financial and in-kind assistance to the OPCW inspection team, including armored vehicles, training, protective equipment, and medical countermeasures. Most significantly, the United States is also contributing unique capabilities to the elimination effort through the Department of Defense's provision of a U.S. vessel, the Motor Vessel (M/V) Cape Ray, equipped with deployable hydrolysis technology to neutralize at sea Syria's highest priority chemical weapons materials (sulfur mustard agent and the sarin precursor chemical, DF).

While U.S. contributions to the elimination efforts are significant, this is ultimately a mission that reflects a remarkable international division of labor. Many of our international partners are participating and providing financial and in-kind assistance that is critical to the effort's success: Danish and Norwegian ships (with Finnish and British support) are removing chemical weapons materials from the Syrian port of Latakia. Russia and China are assisting with security in Syrian territorial waters for the port loading operations. Italy has agreed to provide a port

to allow transloading operations from the Danish cargo ship to the Cape Ray. The United Kingdom has agreed to destroy nerve agent precursor chemicals through commercial incineration. Germany has agreed to destroy the by-product resulting from neutralization of the sulfur mustard agent aboard the M/V Cape Ray as an in-kind contribution. Countries like Japan, Canada, the European Union and many other states have made generous financial contributions. Companies in the United States and Finland have been awarded contracts from the OPCW for the destruction of the remaining materials.

As the removal and elimination process continues, we will also continue to fully support the OPCW's verification and inspection efforts, to ensure the accuracy and completeness of Syria's declaration. We have never taken the Asad regime at its word, and will continue to press for a robust verification regime to ensure the absence of undeclared materials and facilities. We approach this process with our eyes wide open, and will insist on international verification.

The path ahead will not be smooth, given the unprecedented scope and timeline for the mission. But we remain resolute in addressing these challenges, given the high stakes for the Syrian people, the region, and the world. Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss this important issue with you. I look forward

to your questions and to consulting with you closely as we continue our efforts to verifiably eliminate Syria's chemical weapons program.