LITHUANIA

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STATEMENT BY
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for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague

Thematic discussion on other weapons of mass destruction
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Mr. Chairman,

Let me congratulate you on assuming this task and to assure you of my delegation’s constructive support.

Lithuania fully endorses the statement delivered by France on behalf of the European Union. Hereby, I wish to draw attention of this Committee to one particular issue: chemical weapons munitions dumped at seas.

There are increasing regional and global concerns in relation to the sea-dumped chemical weapons and munitions - a toxic legacy of wars for future generations. The issue is global in nature and has the potential to affect many littoral nations. Chemical weapons were dumped in many of the world’s bodies of water, including the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic Ocean, the White Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, the Indian Ocean, the North Sea, the North and South Pacific Oceans, and the Tasman Sea. More than forty states signaled that sea-dumped chemical weapons directly or indirectly affect them. They impact on the environment, human health. Lately this problem has been posing economic, safety and security concerns.

The recognition of multiple problems arising from sea-dumped chemical weapons in the Baltic Sea prompted the Helsinki Commission to commission the report in 1992. Experts from the Baltic States, Scandinavia, the United States and United Kingdom concluded that the rate at which agents were being released into the environment was low and unlikely to pose a significant risk to the littoral states. However, underlying these conclusions was the assumption that the chemical munitions will lie essentially undisturbed. A factor behind the recent increase in concern is the likelihood that this assumption is no longer valid.

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In excess of 50,000 tons of chemical warfare munitions containing more than 10,000 tons of highly active toxicants, including arsencals, were dumped in the Baltic Sea. Unlike any other dumping ground, the shallow and closed Baltic Sea is particularly fragile. Disturbance of the Baltic seabed may trigger an economic, security, and environmental disaster for the littoral states. The plans to build the Nord Stream gas pipeline passing over, or close to, the chemical munitions dumpsites on the bottom of the Baltic Sea place the issue on the international and regional agenda. It calls for international cooperation and exchange of information. It necessitates the realization of sustainable risk reduction action plans, an analysis of potential cost-effective remediation strategies, and the exchange of best practices and policies in other regions.

The drafters of the Chemical Weapons Convention, being aware of the immense cost of destroying the stocks of chemical weapons, excluded all chemical weapons dumped at sea before 1 January 1985 from the scope of the treaty. Some aspects of mitigating the adverse impact of such category of weapons were covered by later treaties, like the 1998 Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (the OSPAR Convention). Sea-dumped chemical weapons, however, remain the fact of life. They affect and will continue to affect us.

We call for deeper international dialogue on how to address this challenge in a cost-effective, safe and acceptable manner. One of the first initiatives was an international seminar organized by the Government of Lithuania at the end of September, this year, in Vilnius, on the perspectives of international cooperation in the area of sea-dumped chemical weapons. Over 90 representatives and renowned experts from 27 states from Europe, Africa, Asia and North America, as well as from UN, OPCW, EU, Helsinki Commission, academic and research institutions, non-governmental organizations, and private sector debated related ecological, safety and security challenges and threats in various parts of the world. The summary report of this seminar has been released as an official document of the UN General Assembly (A/C.1/63/4).

This event echoed a growing interest to intensify and promote dialogue and broader engagement on this issue within international and regional forums and frameworks. More importantly, security and economic implications were considered by many nations of equal concern with environmental and health impact of sea-dumped chemical weapons.

The Government of Lithuania will promote voluntary international and regional cooperation, exchange of information on best practices, policies, lessons, and available technologies. Our efforts are aimed at improving our capabilities to respond to incidents involving sea-dumped chemical munitions and to prevent relevant risks, including the risk of terrorism, in general. We will seek the support of States to develop deeper understanding of this issue within the appropriate international frameworks, such as the United Nations and OPCW. Active engagement of these two organizations is indispensable.