

Chemical Watchdog Wins Nobel Prize

- [Arms Control Today](#)

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The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on Oct. 11 for its efforts in eliminating the scourge of chemical warfare.

The honor boosted the Hague-based organization just 10 days after its personnel arrived in Syria on the most challenging mission of its 16-year history: dismantling the chemical arsenal of President Bashar al-Assad's besieged government.

In an Oct. 11 statement to the press, OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü, a former Turkish diplomat, said the OPCW operates "away from the glare of international publicity" while taking on the "onerous but noble task" of implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention, which took effect in 1997.

In an interview with Nobelprize.org, Üzümcü said the prize "will give a new impetus and encouragement, I should say, great incentive to our staff who are working in the secretariat, and who are deployed also in Syria."

With civil war raging in Syria, Üzümcü noted the challenge facing the OPCW team working in the country. Its mission was authorized by a UN Security Council resolution that was based on a U.S.-Russian plan and unanimously approved by the Security Council in response to the Aug. 21 chemical attack that killed more than 1,000 people in a Damascus suburb.

"Never in the history of our organization have we been called on to verify a destruction program within such short timeframes—and in an ongoing conflict," Üzümcü said.

UN Security Council Resolution 2118 demands the destruction of chemical weapons production and mixing and filling equipment by Nov. 1 and complete disarmament and destruction of chemical weapons in Syria by the first half of 2014. The OPCW said in late October that the Syrian government was cooperating with its mission team.

Reaction Divided

The Syrian government welcomed the announcement of the prize while spokesmen for the rebels called the honor premature.

Fayez Sayigh, a member of the Syrian ruling party, told the Associated Press that Syria was setting an example for other countries that have chemical and nuclear weapons. A spokesman for the Free Syrian Army, one of the factions fighting Assad's government, said, "Our problem is not just chemical weapons," citing the estimated 100,000 people killed by conventional weapons. The Nobel committee, the spokesman said, "forgot about our blood."

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry welcomed the award and praised the work of the OPCW. "The Nobel committee has rightly recognized their bravery and resolve to carry out this vital mission amid an ongoing war in Syria," he said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry also applauded the decision, calling the OPCW "one of the most

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effective international bodies in the field of disarmament and nonproliferation.”

In its announcement of the prize, the Nobel committee noted that the United States and Russia failed to meet an April 2012 deadline for destroying their own stockpiles of chemical weapons. Russia, which has destroyed 76 percent of its arsenal according to the OPCW, has said it will complete the job by 2015, citing a lack of funds. The United States, which has destroyed more than 90 percent of its chemical stockpile, says it will complete the job by 2023.

In the interview, Üzümcü said the U.S. and Russian chemical destruction totals were “quite significant achievements” and that he expected the two countries “to fulfill their obligations in the coming years.”

Effect of the Prize

As Üzümcü noted, the OPCW largely worked in obscurity until September when the UN Security Council approved the chemical disarmament plan.

The Nobel prize will help the OPCW when it comes time actually to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons, according to Raymond Zilinskas of the Monterey Institute of International Studies. The OPCW’s “heightened prestige” will put it in a better position to ask its member states “to provide the expert assistance, equipment such as mobile destruction plants, and funding to pay for it all,” Zilinskas, who served as a UN chemical and biological weapons inspector in Iraq in 1994, said in an Oct. 22 e-mail. “I mean, what country is going to turn down a request made by a Nobel Peace Prize winner?”

Several countries have made financial commitments to the OPCW to carry out its work in Syria. That effort is not covered by the organization’s 2013 budget of 69.8 million euros (\$96 million).

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