

# The Disarmament Bulletin

*A review of national and international disarmament and arms control activities*

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## Paris Conference on Chemical Weapons



*The Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Right Honourable Joe Clark, speaking at the Paris Conference on Chemical Weapons.*

belief that something had to be done — and soon — to ensure that states in future would not think they could resort with impunity to the use of chemical weapons.

A little more than three months, including the Christmas/New Year holiday period, was all the time available to prepare for the Conference, to take whatever action one could bilaterally and in group consultations to ensure that the Conference would avoid potential pitfalls and not end in disarray. The stakes were high indeed: failure of the Paris Conference would likely threaten the ongoing negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva and, contrary to the original aim, add further fuel to the notion that chemical weapons were somehow a useful, perhaps even necessary, addition to national arsenals.

To understand what was accomplished at the five-day Paris Conference, it is necessary to understand what was not intended and what fell outside its reach. It is also important to be aware of the peculiar dynamics of multilateral diplomacy which, contrary to what some might have us believe, is not necessarily an exercise in finding the lowest common denominator.

The Paris Conference, although stemming in many respects from the confirmed use of chemical weapons by Iraq in the Gulf War, was not intended to be an international tribunal dwelling on those past actions, however repulsive in themselves. Furthermore, the Conference could not address the structure and process of the United Nations, which many felt should have done more after the first confirmed use of these horrible weapons. Clearly, in only five days it could not seek to strengthen

For five days in January, the media focussed public attention on the first major international event of the year. More than an ordinary "event," it was about a broken treaty, the repugnance of chemical weapons, deep-rooted fears and, not least, hope for the future. Add varying quantities of East-West and North-South tension, regional antagonisms and distrust, and we had the ingredients for the Paris Conference. It is not surprising that at the working level there was some initial apprehension that greeted President Reagan's September proposal for an international conference to reaffirm the 1925 Geneva Protocol which prohibits the use in war of chemical weapons, particularly since early reactions suggested the agenda might be unrealistically broadened. However, there was also a strong, shared

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