

I come now to a subject of overriding importance to my Government: the completion of a Convention banning all chemical weapons forever. We take very seriously the growing danger posed by these weapons. Not only do some countries hold large and increasing stocks of these frightful weapons but recent evidence clearly points to their use by some governments, in defiance of international condemnation. There is no reason why the Conference on Disarmament should not make rapid progress in negotiating a total ban on these abhorrent weapons, as Mrs. Thatcher urged in Budapest a few days ago. The British Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, recalled in Stockholm last month that Britain has taken a leading role in efforts to secure disarmament in this field. As he said, we see no reason to depart from the objective, which we have set ourselves in this Conference on Disarmament, of a total and fully verifiable ban on chemical warfare, to be applied worldwide. My Government therefore warmly welcomes the intention of the United States, announced by Secretary Schultz in Stockholm, to submit to this Conference in the near future a draft comprehensive treaty with those aims.

Almost 60 years ago, in 1925, the Geneva Protocol was signed in this city. Its authors perhaps believed they had done what was necessary, by prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, to remove forever the scourge which had blighted so many lives in the First World War. The 1925 Protocol occupies a worthy place in the corpus of international agreements designed to prevent human suffering. But it does not ban the manufacture or stockpiling of chemical weapons, nor provide for verification of compliance, which is so vital to ensuring trust. The duty of this Conference is to build upon the foundation provided by the Protocol and to ensure that a new Convention, banning chemical weapons from the face of the earth, is established without delay.

My own country relinquished its chemical weapons a quarter of a century ago. Regrettably, others did not follow suit. In the case of the Soviet Union, the capacity to wage chemical warfare has steadily increased. My Government welcomes the recent signs of renewed Soviet interest in banning chemical weapons, to the extent that these represent an acknowledgement that the time has come to reach an agreement banning the manufacture, stockpiling and use of these dreadful weapons. But I ask the delegations represented here today — does a regional ban on such easily transported weapons as chemical weapons make any sense? Why should Europe have priority in benefiting from a chemical weapons ban, when all the disturbing reports in recent years of use of chemical warfare have come from various parts of Asia? A regional approach to this problem would be a poor second best; and humanity deserves better than second best.

My Government regrets that the Committee on Disarmament was unable in 1983 to conclude a Convention to outlaw these abominable weapons. Despite many constructive proposals from the Western delegations, including the British paper on the important issue of verification of non-production of chemical weapons, which my predecessor introduced on 10 March last year, the Committee completed its deliberations last year empty-handed.