

Canada has long held the view that the spread of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them represent a serious threat to world peace. Two years ago, Prime Minister Mulroney outlined a comprehensive program to stop this proliferation and urged the mobilization of political will within the international community to secure this goal. With the signature of this Convention, I am pleased that we have made major progress in this direction.

Because of our own history, Canadians have attached a particular priority to the abolition of chemical weapons. In April 1915, Canadian, French and French colonial troops in the Ypres Salient in Belgium were victims of the first gas attack on the Western Front. As the official history of the Canadian army recorded: "The damp cloths over their mouths and nostrils, untreated with any chemical, helped but little against the chlorine, and with eyes blinded and throats burning men collapsed on the floor of the trench in suffocating agony." Many died. Many more survived to spend the rest of their lives suffering physically and mentally from the effects of that traumatic attack and others like it over the next three years of that war.

Almost three-quarters of a century later, their agony is still not fully appreciated.

Although only a few states now admit to having chemical weapons, many others are reported to have the capability of using them. We were all shocked by the pictures of the Iranian and Kurdish victims of Iraqi chemical weapons. As we saw in the Gulf, the fear that chemical weapons might be directed not only against military forces but also against defenceless civilians has been a constant nightmare.

The agreement between the United States and Russia to destroy their arsenals was an important milestone on the way to a world free from chemical weapons. Now we have agreed on a Convention to prohibit their development, production, stockpiling and use and to ensure their destruction. This Convention does more than block proliferation. It is the first agreement ever both to ban a complete category of weapons of mass destruction and to provide for comprehensive verification.

Of course our signatures this week are not enough. We must ensure that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will have the necessary political commitment as well as the resources to ensure that the verification regime outlined in detail in the Convention can become an effective reality. We must each ratify and implement the Convention within our own countries so that other states will have confidence in our ability to live up to the commitments we are making here today.