

18. Chemical and biological security threats

Overview

In 2015 the states parties to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) met at the last intersessional annual meetings before the Eighth Review Conference to be held in November 2016 (see section I). The three standing agenda items for the intersessional meetings were cooperation and assistance, a review of developments in science and technology, and the strengthening of national implementation. The special biennial topic for 2015 was on implementation of Article VII of the BTWC, which relates to assistance to those threatened by biological weapons.

Legal and political frameworks for biological and chemical safety and security include activities that strengthen international prohibitions against chemical and biological warfare. The United States' National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity devoted substantial attention in 2015 to the security and safety implications of gain-of-function research. This research has safety and security implications in cases where the ability of a pathogen to cause disease is enhanced (see section I).

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) continued to verify compliance with the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). It remained heavily engaged in the work, begun in 2013, to confirm the accuracy and completeness of Syria's declarations on, and destruction of, its chemical weapons and associated infrastructure (see section II). The last of the toxic chemicals and precursors removed from Syria during maritime operations in 2013–14 were destroyed in January 2016.

There were further allegations (some confirmed) of the use of chemical weapons in Syria and, perhaps, the surrounding region. This prompted the United Nations Security Council to pass Resolution 2235 (2015) which established an OPCW–UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) (see section III). The JIM, which comprises 24 experts, became fully operational on 13 November 2015 and will operate for 12 months. It is tasked with identifying the broader context of the alleged chemical weapon attacks, including co-conspirators, organizers, financial backers and sponsors.

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