

8. Chemical and biological security threats

Overview

The United Nations, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and governments continued to evaluate allegations of chemical weapon (CW) use in Iraq and Syria in 2017. Both the UN Security Council and the OPCW Executive Council remained deadlocked on the question of Syrian Government responsibility for CW use (see section I), including with regard to the use of sarin at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April. This attack prompted the United States to launch retaliatory Tomahawk cruise missile strikes against a Syrian airbase.

The mandate of the OPCW–UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) in Syria expired in November because the Security Council was unable to agree terms for an extension. While it operated, the JIM issued seven reports and concluded that the Syrian Government was responsible for four cases of CW use and that non-state actors were responsible for two cases. The work of the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team on the completeness and correctness of Syria's declarations to the Technical Secretariat and of the OPCW Fact-finding Mission (FFM) to evaluate allegations of CW use in Syria will continue in 2018. The FFM provided the information baseline on allegations of CW use to the JIM.

As the Islamic State group lost territory in both Iraq and Syria, various governments undertook further efforts to ascertain the group's CW-related intentions and capabilities. The work of international criminal investigations and prosecutions, such as the 'International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011' established by the UN General Assembly at the end of 2016, could eventually facilitate the achievement of a common international understanding on responsibility for all the documented instances of confirmed CW use.

No authoritative public information was made available on the sampling and analysis of the chemical (understood to be VX) used to kill Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother of Kim Jong Un, the leader of North Korea, at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Malaysia, in February 2017. The Malaysian authorities put on trial the two women who were recorded by surveillance cameras applying a substance to the face of the victim. The OPCW and several of its member states provided Malaysia with unspecified technical support with the investigation (see section II).

Russia—formerly the largest possessor of chemical weapons—completed the destruction of its stockpile in 2017, as required by the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). The 22nd Conference of the States Parties (CSP) to the CWC convened in November 2017 (see section III). It reviewed the status of planning for the Fourth CWC Review Conference, which will be held in 2018, and elected Ambassador Fernando Arias of Spain as the next Director-General. It remains to be seen how Syria, which became a party to the CWC in 2013, will operate within the treaty regime (including in relation to forthcoming changes to the senior OPCW leadership) where relations among the parties are informed by a strongly held concept of equal rights and obligations. In particular, the parties have been unable to reach common understanding on whether Syria should be treated as uncooperative and in fundamental non-compliance with its treaty obligations, or if the country should be treated as a ‘normal’ party working towards clarifying concerns regarding its treaty obligations in good faith.

In December the annual meeting of states parties (MSP) to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) agreed a further intersessional process of annual meetings for the period 2018–20. The parties will continue to discuss and promote common understanding and effective action on selected topics. Some states parties wish to move the interactions among the membership towards more specific discussions about compliance. These parties have continued to focus on modifications to the content, structure and handling of the current politically binding information exchanges that are intended to serve as confidence-building measures. The 2017 outcome represents a continuation of the status quo, whereby information, views and best practices on the convention’s various provisions are exchanged in annual Meetings of Experts and MSPs with the support of the Geneva-based Implementation Support Unit (ISU). The BTWC regime also continued to experience financial difficulties due to the continuing underpayment or non-payment of assessed contributions by many states parties (see section IV).

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