

8. Chemical and biological security threats

Overview

Allegations of chemical weapon use by Syria continued to dominate the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in 2018. The Declaration Assessment Team continued its work to resolve gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies in Syria's initial declaration, and the Fact-finding Mission in Syria continued to collect and analyse information in relation to allegations of use. Among the allegations was an attack in Douma on 7 April 2018 that prompted the United States, the United Kingdom and France to launch retaliatory strikes against three sites one week later.

Outside of Syria, a toxic chemical from the novichok nerve agent family was used in Salisbury, UK, in March 2018, hospitalizing three people. Two further people were exposed to the same agent in an associated event in June. One of these, Dawn Sturgess, subsequently died in July. At the request of the UK under Article VIII, subparagraph 38(e) of the 1993 Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (the Chemical Weapons Convention, CWC), the OPCW provided technical assistance and made two visits to the UK. Analysis by OPCW-designated laboratories of the samples taken during these visits confirmed the UK's findings.

It was against this backdrop that attribution of responsibility for chemical weapon use became a major focal issue for states parties to the CWC. The expiry of the mandate of the OPCW–United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism created a lacuna in the international community's ability to respond to use once proved. In an attempt to fill this lacuna, France launched the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons in January 2018. By the end of the year, membership of the partnership was 38 countries plus the European Union. In May 2018, 11 permanent representatives to the OPCW requested that a Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties be convened with a single substantive agenda item: upholding the global ban on chemical weapons. Held over two days in June, the Special Session decided, by vote, to empower the OPCW with the ability to attribute responsibility.

The issues surrounding the use of chemical weapons, and attribution of responsibility if use has been found, have resulted in a major division between states parties to the CWC. Those states parties which support the June decision consider the numerous claims of chemical weapon use in Syria by the Syrian Government to be credible and so hold the view that an attribution mechanism

is essential; those which oppose the June decision argue that these allegations are based on fabrications and statements that have politicized the OPCW. This division has effectively destroyed—at least in the short term—the consensus model that has been the norm for decision making within the OPCW, and created serious tensions as a result. Relations between states parties were strained at both the 23rd Conference of the States Parties and the 4th Review Conference. Further, the UN General Assembly’s consideration of the resolutions relating to chemical and biological weapons proved difficult.

Despite these problems, there were some positive developments in 2018. The clean-up of the former chemical weapon storage site at Ruwagha Tank Farm in Libya was making progress and destruction of chemical weapons abandoned in China by Japan was continuing. The OPCW’s subsidiary boards also continued their important work, and Ambassador Fernando Arias of Spain began his four-year term as Director-General of the OPCW in July.

In the field of biological disarmament and non-proliferation, the focus in 2018 was on the Meetings of Experts and the Meeting of States Parties to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC). The overriding concern of these meetings was the adverse financial environment of the BWC, and discussions in December concentrated on urgent measures to ensure future financial predictability and sustainability. The meeting endorsed a set of substantive measures to encourage timely payment, ensure liquidity and avoid deficit spending or accumulation of liabilities. Further discussions on the financial situation will take place in 2019.

In an unanticipated development, the Meeting of States Parties was unable to reach a consensus on the deliberations of the Meetings of Experts, including on any possible outcomes. This was despite considerable preparation and substantial discussion at the August meetings, as well as concerted efforts by the vast majority of states parties negotiating the final report to get more of the substantive discussions reflected. The impasse resulted from what was labelled the ‘obstinacy’ of a single delegation, and underscores the outdated working methods employed by the convention’s meetings.

The failure to agree a substantive outcome stood in stark contrast not only to the activities connected to the Meetings of Experts, but also to BWC-related activities more broadly in 2018. The unusually large number of workshops that took place in 2018 was testament to the interest, initiatives and financial support of a growing number of individual states or groups of states parties, civil society and other actors to strengthen the norm and prohibition against biological weapons.

Other major developments in biological disarmament and non-proliferation in 2018 were the publication of the UN Secretary-General’s Disarmament Agenda, and increasingly confrontational statements by Russia alleging that US biological weapon laboratories are operating in neighbouring states, most notably in Georgia.