

## 12. Chemical and biological security threats

### Overview

*Allegations of chemical weapons use by Syria continued to be investigated by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in 2019. The Declaration Assessment Team continued its work to resolve gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies in Syria's initial declaration, and the Fact-finding Mission (FFM) in Syria continued to collect and analyse information in relation to allegations of use. The FFM reported in March 2019 that there were 'reasonable grounds' for believing that a chemical weapon attack occurred in Douma in April 2018. Some of the report's findings proved controversial and were challenged by a few states.*

*Outside of Syria, investigations were ongoing into the use of a toxic chemical from the novichok nerve agent family in the UK in March 2018. In January 2019, the European Union placed the two Russian nationals charged with carrying out the attack on a European sanctions list. The head and deputy head of the GRU, the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, were also included on the list. In March, the UK announced that the specialist decontamination work at the 12 sites across Salisbury and Amesbury had been completed.*

*Continued divisions among states parties over the decision adopted at the June 2018 Special Session, placed high levels of institutional stress on the OPCW during 2019. In particular, a small number of states parties continued to regard the decision to establish an Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) as illegitimate. Nonetheless, the IIT, which is responsible for identifying the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, became fully operational in March 2019 and is focusing on nine incidents of use. The political divisions played out in OPCW Executive Council meetings and at the main conference of the year, the 24th Session of the Conference of States Parties (CSP) to the Chemical Weapons Convention. However, the CSP did manage to adopt two decisions by consensus to amend for the first time the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention to include novichok agents.*

*As of 31 October 2019, 97.3 per cent of declared Category 1 chemical weapons had been destroyed under international verification. The USA remains the only declared possessor state party with CWs yet to be destroyed, but is expected to complete its remaining destruction activities within the current timelines.*

*In 2019, Tanzania became the 183rd state party to ratify the principal legal instrument against biological warfare: the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC). Key biological disarmament and non-proliferation activities*

*in 2019 were carried out in connection with the second set of 2018–20 BWC intersessional Meetings of Experts (MXs)—MX1 focused on cooperation and assistance; MX2 on science and technology; MX3 on national implementation; MX4 on assistance, response and preparedness; and MX5 on institutional strengthening—the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly and the BWC Meeting of States Parties (MSP).*

*Reviewing the financial situation of the BWC formed a central focus for the 2019 MSP meeting. The meeting also considered the reports of each MX, but as in 2018 the MSP report simply noted that ‘no consensus was reached on the deliberations including any possible outcomes of the Meetings of Experts’. However, the chair proposed and initiated a new process to circumvent the reporting impasse and feed substantive work of the MXs into the MSPs and the 2021 Review Conference. The process also encourages states parties to establish continuity between the work of the three intersessional years, to synthesize the work and identify areas of convergence, and to avoid a confrontational approach. In particular, disagreements between the USA and Russia seem set to continue.*

*One of the developing trends in the field is the rise of civil society as a major contributor to shaping global dialogues around biological threats and appropriate responses to them. This is reflected in greater numbers of NGO participants attending BWC meetings and organizing side events, but also in civil society organizations convening global initiatives, workshops and events related to biosecurity. A new development in 2019 was the growing recognition of the topic of ‘gender and disarmament’ within the BWC community.*

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