

## 12. Chemical and biological security threats

### Overview

*In 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic changed the world in a way that very few had anticipated. Section I outlines the timeline of the pandemic; the impacts on people's health and on society; competing theories on the origin of the virus; studies into the origins; and its implications for global biosecurity architecture. By the end of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) had received reports of over 82 million cases of Covid-19 worldwide, and there had been over 1.8 million recorded deaths. The actual number of infections and recorded deaths were likely to be considerably higher from undiagnosed cases and generally poor Covid-19-related data. The pandemic's global socio-economic impacts were at levels unprecedented since World War II.*

*According to the state of knowledge at the end of 2020 about Covid-19 and its origin, it was generally thought to be a natural disease outbreak, first detected in Wuhan, China, on the last day of 2019, although very little was known about how, where and when it started circulating. While the 'natural spillover' theory appeared to be the most convincing, a more marginal theory held that the virus could have originated from a research-related incident. Identifying the source of the disease should have been a routine scientific matter; instead it became highly politicized. China in particular made significant attempts to control the pandemic origins narrative, including efforts to stifle the research-related accident theory. In May 2020, the WHO was tasked with trying to establish the origin of the virus, with a WHO-led international mission to be deployed to China in early 2021.*

*The Covid-19 pandemic, and its public and socio-economic impacts, also threw into sharp relief a problem faced by all governments: how to successfully predict and prepare for biosecurity-related threats to citizens and to national and international security. The biological threat spectrum is complex and evolving, and includes natural disease outbreaks, the unintended consequences of laboratory accidents, the intentional use of disease as a weapon, and now, arguably, biological information warfare.*

*The pandemic also significantly impacted the functioning of key biological disarmament and non-proliferation activities in 2020, as discussed in section II. Intersessional meetings of experts and the meeting of states parties under the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) were postponed until 2021. Nonetheless, some significant BWC-related activities and developments still took place during 2020. These included the 45th anniversary of the BWC's entry into force, a United Nations Security Council open debate on pandemics*

*and security in July 2020, and a new controversial UN General Assembly draft resolution on the UN Secretary-General's Mechanism (UNSGM) for investigating allegations of use of chemical and biological weapons.*

*The introduction of the UNSGM resolution by Russia was consistent with other efforts by a handful of actors, including misinformation and disinformation campaigns, to stop, hinder, undermine and contest the authority and work of investigation teams within the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the UN. The Syrian chemical weapons investigations that continued in 2020 (see section III), as well as other experiences, point to investigations becoming more contentious, complex and important. Divisions were also evident in the UN Security Council meetings on Syria and chemical weapons in 2020.*

*Outside of Syria, there were further developments in 2020 related to toxic chemicals from the novichok group of nerve agents, covered in section IV. These included the entry into force of the technical changes to Schedule 1 of chemicals in the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and a new instance of alleged use in the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. The OPCW confirmed that a cholinesterase inhibitor from the novichok group was used to poison Navalny, although it was a type not listed in the Schedule.*

*The pandemic caused the postponement of routine and other inspections by the OPCW Technical Secretariat throughout 2020, as discussed in section V. The main conference of the year, the 25th Session of the Conference of the States Parties (CSP) to the CWC, did go ahead in an adapted format, but with a second part scheduled for 2021. Political divisions were again evident at the CSP and in OPCW Executive Council meetings, especially over the draft programme and budget, as well as efforts to address the threat from chemicals that act on the central nervous system. As of 30 November 2020, 98.3 per cent of declared Category 1 chemical weapons had been destroyed under international verification. The United States remains the only declared possessor state party with chemical weapons yet to be destroyed, but is expected to complete its remaining destruction activities within the current timelines.*

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