

9. Chemical, biological and health security threats

Overview

In 2022 the coronavirus causing Covid-19 remained widespread but was significantly less fatal than it was in 2020–21; in most countries, it spurred only limited changes in public behaviour. However, the origins of the pandemic continued to be a politically divisive subject and remained unresolved at the end of 2022 (see section I). In addition, an escalating global mpox outbreak was declared a public health emergency of international concern in July 2022. While the mpox outbreak was brought under control, it reinforced the lesson from the Covid-19 pandemic that the international community needs to be much better prepared for responding to future pandemics. Negotiations continued in 2022 towards a new international treaty to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

Russia's longstanding campaign about what it considers nefarious activities at Western 'biolabs' significantly escalated in 2022 (see section II). It led to a formal consultative meeting under Article V of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) in September 2022 and to several rounds of discussions in the United Nations Security Council, culminating in an unprecedented request from Russia in October 2022 for an investigation into 'military biological activities in Ukraine'. Security Council members did not find Russia's evidence convincing and voted against Russia's proposal. However, Russia's allegations of non-compliance and its misuse of disarmament instruments for its own disinformation purposes pose significant challenges for the BWC and its credibility, and divert attention from the real work of strengthening the convention.

The principal legal instrument against biological warfare is the BWC and in 2022 Namibia became the 185th state party. A further four states have signed but not ratified the convention, and nine states have neither signed nor ratified the convention. Key biological disarmament and non-proliferation activities in 2022 were carried out in connection with the BWC preparatory committee, the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, and the ninth review conference (RevCon9) of the BWC (see section III).

Given the current geopolitical challenges, the longstanding BWC logjam and Russia's allegations, many political statements in the run-up to RevCon9 emphasized the need for collaboration and substantive outcomes. However, consensus again proved largely elusive. Despite agreement on an intersessional programme of work for 2023–26 and establishing a working group on strength-

ening the BWC, the conference was unable to agree a solemn declaration, an article-by-article review, and a substantive outcome to the 2017–20 inter-sessional programme. Finding sufficient common ground to successfully negotiate substantive outcomes will be challenging at the 10th review conference in 2027.

As in the BWC, there were disagreements within the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), including continuing efforts by a handful of actors to stop, hinder, undermine and contest the authority and work of investigation teams within the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) (see section IV). The investigations into alleged chemical weapon use in Syria continued and, although no new instances of chemical weapon use were reported in 2022, the number of confirmed cases rose to 20 from a total of 71 cases investigated. None of the 20 outstanding issues related to Syria's declarations to the OPCW that were unresolved at the end of 2021 could be clarified in 2022. Hence, the OPCW continued to assess at the end of the year that Syria's declaration 'still cannot be considered accurate and complete'.

Outside of Syria, during 2022 there were also some largely inconclusive follow-up actions in relation to the poisoning of Russian citizen Alexei Navalny with a novichok nerve agent in 2020, as well as multiple but unproved allegations of illegal chemical activities during the war in Ukraine. Continuing divisions over the investigation into chemical weapon use in Syria, as well as the unresolved poisoning of Navalny and the unfolding war in Ukraine, strongly suggest that investigations will become even more contentious and complex—and important.

On 29 April 2022 the CWC celebrated the 25th anniversary of its entry into force. Future challenges include the prevention of the re-emergence of chemical weapons, a changing industry landscape, technological developments, and non-state actors harbouring an interest in chemical weapons (see section V). On a more positive note, routine and other inspections by the OPCW Technical Secretariat became more frequent in 2022, as pandemic-related restrictions eased. In addition, construction of the new Centre for Chemistry and Technology was completed in 2022 and the centre is expected to be fully operational by April 2023. Finally, the United States, the only declared possessor state party with chemical weapons yet to be destroyed, is expected to complete its remaining destruction activities according to schedule by the end of 2023.

States parties to the CWC will hold the fifth review conference of the treaty in May 2023 and in preparation for this established an open-ended working group in March 2022 that met 10 times before the end of the year. The review conference will discuss a range of important topics in particularly challenging circumstances, given the stark polarization in the OPCW's policy-making organs over compliance politics. At the same time, the review conference might set important landmarks for the way ahead.