

## 9. Chemical, biological and health security threats

### Overview

*Proceedings in the main international forums on the prevention of chemical and biological warfare were characterized in 2023 by obstruction and disinformation by a small number of states. This contrasted with some positive achievements in the field of health security and chemical disarmament.*

*The OPCW's investigations into alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria continued in 2023 amid on-going efforts by a handful of actors to hinder and contest the authority and work of the investigation teams (see section I). None of the 20 outstanding issues related to Syria's declarations to the OPCW that were unresolved at the end of 2022 could be clarified in 2023. To address ongoing concerns about Syrian compliance, the 2023 meeting of the OPCW Conference of the States Parties (CSP) invoked additional measures under CWC Article XII to redress the situation: it recommended that CWC states parties take collective measures to prevent the supply, sale or transfer to Syria of certain 'chemical precursors and dual-use chemical manufacturing facilities and equipment and related technology' and requested the OPCW director-general to bring the matter to the attention of the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council. However, as with other decisions related to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the CSP could not reach consensus and so a vote was taken: 69 states parties voted in favour of the decision, 10 voted against it and 45 abstained. During 2023 there were also further allegations of illegal chemical activities, including the use of riot control agents as a method of warfare by Russia. These allegations and the divisions over the investigation into chemical weapon use in Syria are likely to continue to have an impact on and complicate the work of the OPCW.*

*There were disagreements within the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), including stark polarization over the politics of compliance with the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). At the fifth Review Conference of the CWC, held in May 2023, the states parties discussed a range of important topics in these particularly challenging circumstances (see section II). While they could not reach consensus on a substantive final document, they made progress in several areas, including adjustments to industry verification, geographical representation, and efforts to prevent and counter chemical terrorism.*

*In a historic step, in 2023 the last of the chemical weapon stockpiles declared by CWC states parties were destroyed under verification of the OPCW (see*

section II). The United States, the only declared possessor state party with declared chemical weapons still to be destroyed, completed its remaining destruction activities on 7 July 2023. The completion of the destruction of all declared stockpiles will allow the OPCW's focus to transition to the prevention of the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

On another positive note, the OPCW's new Centre for Chemistry and Technology became operational in March 2023 and was formally inaugurated on 12 May 2023. The OPCW and the CWC states parties also have a rich agenda of scientific and technical issues to address in a practical way, including work on biotoxins, chemical forensics, and the role of enabling technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and additive manufacturing. Thus, despite the political polarization, the OPCW's ongoing activities on verification and on international cooperation and assistance will continue.

Russia's allegations of other states' non-compliance with the ban on biological weapons and its misuse of disarmament instruments for its own disinformation purposes continued in all relevant forums in 2023 (see section III). Its strategic campaign to disrupt and paralyse the principal such forum—the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC)—poses significant challenges for the functioning and credibility of the convention. Nonetheless, several proposals on compliance and verification, some old and some new, were discussed in 2023. The newly established working group on strengthening the BWC met three times during the year, although no collective conclusions or concrete recommendations were forthcoming.

Key biological disarmament and non-proliferation activities in 2023 were also carried out in the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly and in the Meeting of States Parties (MSP) of the BWC. However, the MSP was disrupted by Russia's procedural manoeuvring. The result was that there was no general debate and no opportunity for international organizations and non-governmental organizations to deliver statements, which had been long-standing past practice. Russia's conduct risks significantly eroding the international architecture against the proliferation and use of biological weapons and diverting attention from the real work of strengthening the BWC.

A combination of national and collaborative efforts meant that 2023 was a record year for infectious disease elimination (see section IV). The two public health emergencies of international concern active at the start of the year—Covid-19 and mpox—were both declared to have ended. The origins of the Covid-19 pandemic remained unresolved, but negotiations on a new international treaty to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response continued.