



**NOTE BY THE TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT**

**UPDATE ON THE IMPACT OF THE OUTBREAK OF THE  
NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) ON THE ORGANISATION  
FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS PROGRAMME IN 2020**

1. On 3 June 2020, the Technical Secretariat (hereinafter “the Secretariat”) issued a Note updating States Parties on the impact of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the Organisation for the Prohibition on Chemical Weapons (OPCW) programme in 2020 (S/1876/2020, dated 3 June 2020), following previous updates in Notes S/1870/2020 (dated 17 April 2020) and S/1863/2020 (dated 20 March 2020). The present Note provides an update for States Parties on the plan for OPCW Secretariat personnel to return to the office as well as on the Secretariat’s verification and international cooperation and assistance activities.

**STAFFING**

2. The Director-General has approved a plan, prepared by the Secretariat’s Task Force on COVID-19 (hereinafter “the Taskforce”), for OPCW personnel to gradually return to work on site at OPCW Headquarters. While the objective of the plan is to maintain and maximise the operational effectiveness of the Secretariat during the pandemic, the health and safety of all OPCW personnel and visitors to OPCW premises remains the priority. Implementation of the plan, therefore, will be conditional on the evolution of COVID-19 and the Dutch coronavirus guidance in this regard.
3. The plan has four phases. Phase 1 (preparing the workplace for higher occupancy levels) has now been completed. Phase 2, according to which a limited number of OPCW personnel whose functions are more effectively carried out at OPCW premises will work some or all of the time at the office, began on 17 August. Where required, the Health and Safety Branch (HSB) will confirm that there are no medical or other considerations that should preclude a staff member’s return to OPCW premises. These criteria and steps will ensure that the process remains aligned with the current Dutch coronavirus guidelines.
4. Personnel who are not directed to return to work at the office under Phase 2 will continue to work from home. Phase 3 of the plan, according to which there will be a gradual increase to maximum occupancy of OPCW premises, with physical distancing in place, will not be implemented until a number of conditions are met, namely: a further relaxation of Dutch coronavirus restrictions; testing availability in line with the Dutch health service; establishment of a local contact tracing system; and improvement in local epidemic conditions. The Taskforce, which continues to



monitor the situation, will make a recommendation to the Director-General in due course on when Phase 3 may begin, on the basis of its assessment of these criteria.

5. In parallel, the Taskforce will establish a working group to consider Phase 4 of the plan—moving towards a sustainable workplace. This working group will consider the technological and organisational innovations that might consolidate and strengthen the Secretariat's resilience going forward, leading to a more agile, efficient, and robust Organisation.
6. Group and private visits to OPCW facilities remain suspended until further notice.

### **MEETINGS**

7. There has been no change to previous guidance on requests by States Parties to use meeting rooms at the Headquarters. For the time being, in-person meetings cannot, unfortunately, be accommodated. The Secretariat may be able to provide technical support to States Parties wishing to hold remote meetings.

### **ACCESS TO OPCW HEADQUARTERS**

8. Beginning with the implementation of Phase 2 on 17 August, the OPCW cafeteria is now open, though for take-away only. Measures to ensure the health and safety of all customers have been implemented.
9. In addition, the duty free store is now open two days a week (Monday and Thursday, from 10:00 to 17:00), with preventative measures in place. The store operator is also offering the opportunity to make appointments during the above opening hours, for those customers who wish to avoid waiting times which may arise from the measures in place.

### **VERIFICATION**

10. With respect to Article IV inspections, the Secretariat continues its verification activities at the chemical weapons destruction facilities, under temporary modifications in accordance with Secretariat Notes EC-94/S/1, EC-94/S/2, EC-94/S/3, and EC-94/S/4 (all dated 6 April 2020), in light of the need to take measures to ensure the health and safety of inspectors and personnel at the sites, and taking into account the applicable health and safety regulations of the concerned State Party. Regarding chemical weapons storage facilities, the Secretariat conducted two storage inspections in August 2020. The Secretariat continues to closely consult the National Authority of the concerned State Party in this regard.
11. Inspections related to chemical weapons abandoned by Japan in the People's Republic of China continue to be postponed, and will be rescheduled in consultation with the concerned States Parties. The Secretariat continues to consult with both concerned States Parties in this regard.
12. Regarding old chemical weapons, the Secretariat conducted one inspection in July and continues its consultations with the other concerned States Parties in order to implement the 2020 inspection plan. Additional inspections are being planned to be carried out in the coming weeks.

13. Inspections related to Article V and decision EC-67/DEC.7 (dated 16 February 2012) of the Executive Council (hereinafter “the Council”), in respect of former chemical weapons production facilities, will be rescheduled to take place later in the year when circumstances allow, in consultation with the concerned States Parties.
14. In view of the previous suspension of Article VI inspections in all States Parties, the Secretariat has developed a plan to resume such inspections, taking into account any national measures in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 as well as the health and safety of inspectors. As part of this plan, the Secretariat held consultations with a number of National Authorities. The plan was presented and made available to all States Parties on 2 June 2020 through the Industry Cluster. States Parties were asked to provide comments and questions regarding the plan by 16 June 2020. The Secretariat prepared a response to the comments and questions received from States Parties and made this available to States Parties on 6 July 2020. H.E. Ambassador Marcin Czepelak, Vice-Chairperson of the Council and Coordinator for Chemical Industry and Other Article VI Issues, reported to the Council on 7 July 2020 on this activity and the general agreement to the plan.
15. As implementation of this plan now moves ahead, the Secretariat is taking into full account the public health situation in States Parties, any travel restrictions, and the availability of flights, with the goal of optimising the number of Article VI inspections conducted effectively, efficiently, and with full regard for the health and safety of all concerned. With this goal in mind, the Secretariat plans to conduct a limited number of Article VI inspections in September 2020. The Secretariat continues to prioritise inspections at Schedule 1 facilities, as well as at Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 plant sites where initial inspections have not yet taken place, as required under the Chemical Weapons Convention (hereinafter “the Convention”). Where practicable, the Secretariat also plans to carry out some inspections at other chemical production facilities (OCPFs) and subsequent inspections in order to make the best use of available resources and opportunities. Each Article VI inspection will be subject to a rigorous planning and decision-making mechanism to account for the evolution of the outbreak of COVID-19 in States Parties, which remains fluid. In any event, and as previously reported, it will not be possible to complete all 241 Article VI inspections in 2020, owing to the measures taken in response to the pandemic situation. Those inspections that are not completed before the end of this year will be prioritised in 2021.
16. All missions of the Secretariat in the Syrian Arab Republic continue to be postponed until further notice. The Secretariat will monitor the situation closely and will keep the Syrian Arab Republic and States Parties duly informed.
17. The Secretariat continues to receive and evaluate States Parties’ declarations and amendments under Articles III, IV, V, and VI.
18. In accordance with its annual practice, in August the Secretariat dispatched letters to States Parties involved in transfer discrepancies arising from their annual declarations on past activities in regard to aggregate national data, as well as reconciliation letters to States Parties that have declared Schedule 2 facilities and/or Schedule 3 facilities and/or OCPFs.

19. The Secretariat continues to organise the official OPCW proficiency tests for environmental and biomedical samples. The Fifth Official OPCW Biomedical Proficiency Test began in February 2020 with the dispatch of samples. Tasks necessary to complete this test are ongoing. The Forty-Seventh Official OPCW Proficiency Test started in April 2020. Sample preparation was performed by an assisting laboratory, with oversight made possible through the presence of one staff member at the said laboratory. Evaluation discussions and individual meetings for the Fifth Official OPCW Biomedical Proficiency Test and the Forty-Seventh Official Proficiency Test were held virtually. The Secretariat is continuing preparations of the final evaluation results and the issuance of its official Notes concerning the test results and the status of OPCW designated laboratories for both tests. These preparations are expected to be completed as scheduled. In addition, the Secretariat has begun preparations for both the Forty-Eighth Official OPCW Proficiency Test (scheduled to begin in October 2020) and the Sixth Official OPCW Biomedical Proficiency Test (scheduled for February 2021). The adaptability of the assisting and participating laboratories in view of the challenges posed by the present circumstances has been key to the Secretariat's ability to ensure that the designated laboratory network is maintained.
20. The Secretariat continues to develop laboratories' capabilities for the analysis of toxins relevant to the Convention through the Fourth Exercise on the Analysis of Biotoxins. This exercise began in December 2019 and the evaluation of results took place from April to June 2020. As with the proficiency tests, the Secretariat has been able to offer participants the opportunity to discuss the exercise results through virtual meetings. The results of the fourth biotoxin exercise demonstrate that the participating laboratories' capabilities continue to be enhanced through these exercises. The Secretariat has begun preparations for the Fifth Exercise on the Analysis of Biotoxins, scheduled to begin in November/December 2020.
21. The Secretariat continues to update the OPCW Central Analytical Database (OCAD). So far, 139 analytical data sets have been sent to the Validation Group for evaluation. These include mass spectrometry (MS), tandem mass spectrometry (MS/MS), gas chromatography-retention indices (GC-RI) and infrared spectroscopy (IR) data. The data include 18 analyses of nine compounds from the newly scheduled chemicals corresponding to the changes to Schedule 1 of the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention, as adopted by the Conference of the States Parties at its Twenty-Fourth Session through decisions C-24/DEC.4 and C-24/DEC.5 (both dated 27 November 2019). The Fiftieth Meeting of the Validation Group will take place as a virtual meeting on 16 September. The validation subgroup meetings will take place virtually to discuss the evaluation of data prior to 16 September.
22. A Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) project is being implemented at the OPCW Laboratory. This software will be a key tool in the management of sample inventory and laboratory instruments, consumables, and chemicals. The LIMS will further develop the existing Quality Management System in accordance with standard ISO 17025 of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). The project started on 1 June 2020 with the involvement of OPCW Laboratory staff in virtual training and workshops. The second phase began on 17 August.

23. The OPCW Laboratory has continued testing and maintaining mission GC/MS instruments to ensure readiness for the resumption of sampling and analysis activities.
24. The OPCW Laboratory activities relating to its Quality Management System continue. A reassessment of the Laboratory's accreditation under the ISO and International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) standards ISO/IEC 17025:2017 and ISO/IEC 17043:2010 was successfully carried out on 7 and 8 April 2020 by the Dutch accreditation body, the *Raad Van Accreditatie*, through remote assessment using Microsoft Teams.

## INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ASSISTANCE

25. Despite the operational restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat has continued to provide capacity-building support to States Parties to deliver on its international cooperation and assistance mandate. As conveyed in the previous Note, starting at the beginning of June, as many as possible of the scheduled in-person training events have been converted into remote learning opportunities, adapted and recalibrated into an online format utilising all available technological means (e.g., webinars, online meetings, eLearning modules, pre-recorded presentations, etc.).
26. As at 21 August 2020, 17 online capacity-building and international cooperation events had been organised, covering all the technical areas mandated for international cooperation and assistance activities. Some 500 participants from governmental and other stakeholders of States Parties benefitted from these online learning opportunities.
27. With the aim of promoting the peaceful uses of chemistry, the Secretariat organised seven remote events, namely: a workshop on assessing and enhancing the capacity of analytical laboratories from Member States in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean (2 and 3 June); a workshop for South Asian Member States on advanced chemical safety and security management towards the implementation of the Article XI Framework (25 June); a forum on peaceful uses of chemistry/new norms for OPCW capacity-building programmes after the COVID-19 pandemic (1 July); an expert group meeting on green and sustainable chemistry (4 and 5 August); an advanced course for African Member States on chemical safety and security management towards the implementation of the National Article XI Framework (12 August); an executive programme on integrated chemicals management (19 August); and a seminar on the Convention and chemical safety and security management for African Member States (19 August).
28. In the area of assistance and protection, two virtual events were organised, including an online course on chemical emergency response for States Parties in Latin America and the Caribbean (1 to 5 June). The course, jointly developed by the Secretariat and the Centre for Chemical Information of Peru (CINQUI), trained first responders and experts in the area of responding to chemical emergencies. The second event was the meeting of the representatives of the assistance and protection partner training centres in Asia (15 and 16 July).

29. In support of national implementation, two online events were organised, including a training course on declarations and inspections obligations under Article VI of the Convention (15 to 24 June), and a general training course on the Convention for the personnel of National Authorities and stakeholders in Spanish-speaking States Parties of Latin America and the Caribbean (29 June to 1 July).
30. Consultations with States Parties are the foundation for the Secretariat's capacity-building programmes, and regular dialogue with and among National Authorities provides essential opportunities in this regard. Given their importance, the Secretariat, despite the pandemic-imposed restrictions, has undertaken to organise meetings of National Authorities at the regional level to review each region's Convention implementation status and discuss assistance needs and priorities in support of national implementation. Four such gatherings were organised (recalibrated into a virtual format) for National Authorities of States Parties in Eastern Europe (28 July), Asia and the Pacific (29 July), Latin America and the Caribbean (30 July), and Africa (4 August).
31. In the context of the Programme to Strengthen Cooperation with Africa on the Chemical Weapons Convention, two events were organised virtually, including the inaugural meeting of the Programme's Steering Committee (26 June), and a recorded presentation of the special projects developed as a basis for mobilising extra-budgetary resources in support of African States Parties (1 July).
32. Given the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat continues to offer—and strive to further improve on—remote capacity-building events. The Secretariat will build on, leverage, and integrate these successful recent experiences for its international cooperation and assistance programmes in the future, to supplement and complement—but not replace—the traditional in-person training formats.

#### **NEXT STEPS**

33. The Secretariat will continue to closely monitor the situation and to adopt appropriate mitigating measures, and will keep States Parties apprised of any relevant developments.