



NOTE BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

UPDATE ON THE TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT'S READINESS TO CONDUCT A CHALLENGE INSPECTION OR AN INVESTIGATION OF ALLEGED USE

Introduction

1. The First Review Conference¹ requested that the Technical Secretariat (the Secretariat) “continue maintaining a high standard of readiness to conduct a challenge inspection in accordance with the provisions of the Convention, to keep the Council informed about its readiness, and to report any problems that may arise in relation to maintaining the necessary level of readiness to conduct a challenge inspection” (paragraph 7.91 of RC-1/5, dated 9 May 2003).
2. The Second Review Conference reiterated this request to the Secretariat (paragraph 9.90 of RC-2/4, dated 18 April 2008).
3. The First Review Conference also “stressed the importance of investigations of alleged use or threat of use of chemical weapons. For such situations, the OPCW must have the capacity, and be ready at all times, to investigate the need for follow-on action by the OPCW and by individual Member States” (paragraph 7.100 of RC-1/5). The Second Review Conference reiterated this concern (paragraph 9.105 of RC-2/4).
4. The Third Review Conference made two requests to the Secretariat with respect to the conduct of a challenge inspection (CI) or an investigation of alleged use (IAU) (paragraph 9.111 of RC-3/3*, dated 19 April 2013). The first was that the Secretariat continue to improve the standard of readiness to conduct a CI or an IAU in accordance with the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention (the Convention). The second was to keep the Executive Council (the Council) informed about its readiness and to report any problems that may arise in relation to maintaining the necessary level of readiness to conduct a CI or an IAU.
5. The Secretariat has previously submitted to the Council several updates on its readiness to conduct a CI or an IAU. This Note concentrates on the activities the Secretariat has undertaken since the last update (EC-103/DG.17, dated 6 July 2023), and highlights issues that still require further consideration and attention by States Parties and by the Secretariat.

¹ Review Conference = Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to Review the Operation of the Chemical Weapons Convention.



The Inspectorate Division, the Contingency and Chemical Demilitarisation Unit of the Inspection Team Personnel, the Mission Support Group, and the Situation Centre

6. The Secretariat has assigned a cadre of inspectors from the Inspection Team Personnel subprogramme of the Inspectorate Division to plan and coordinate the implementation of training and exercises with the purpose of ensuring the Secretariat's readiness to respond to the use or threat of use of chemical weapons, to provide assistance and protection against the use of chemical weapons, and to lead the conduct of non-routine missions, including CIs and IAUs, in accordance with Articles IX and X of the Convention or the mandate of the Council.
7. To properly manage the command-and-control elements of a CI, an IAU, or other non-routine mission, the Secretariat continues to rely on the support provided by the Mission Support Group (MSG), which provides support to teams deployed on non-routine missions.
8. Under the supervision of the Operations and Technology Support Branch, the Situation Centre provides 24-hour, real-time mission support to deployed teams by managing the information and data flow between the ongoing CI or IAU missions and the MSG. This includes the capability to provide an initial analysis, a comprehensive common operating picture, secure and reliable communications, and up-to-date information and analyses to facilitate senior management's decision-making.

Operational procedures and training of inspectors

9. Since the last reporting period and up to the cut-off date of 31 May 2024, Inspectorate training programmes continued to maintain the mandatory requirements under the Quality Management System for the conduct of inspection activities, and for the preparation of inspectors and inspection team leaders to perform inspection duties for CIs and IAUs.
10. As reported previously, the Secretariat continues to regularly update its existing training programmes and to develop and implement new ones aimed at strengthening and adapting capabilities to conduct non-routine missions such as CIs and IAUs.
11. Throughout the reporting period, the Inspectorate's Contingency and Chemical Demilitarisation Unit (CCD) coordinated and/or delivered various training components, including initial inspector training, certifications, recertifications, and general and specialised training. The training programme involved relevant Secretariat staff members, including from the Inspectorate.
12. Listed below are relevant training components pertaining to the conduct of CIs, IAUs and other non-routine missions:
 - (a) Initial inspector training: Six new inspectors (Group V) completed all mandatory training, cross-training, and certifications in order to meet required OPCW standards; this includes gaining the fundamental knowledge required to conduct both routine and non-routine missions, including IAUs and CIs.

- (b) Toxic chemical training (TCT): TCT is mandatory for inspectors and select Secretariat staff who may be exposed to chemical warfare agents. The training provides the practical skills to safely encounter, detect, and understand the physical properties of chemical warfare agents. Two iterations of TCT were organised and conducted: the first was held in Serbia for six Group V inspectors in October 2023, and a second refresher TCT took place in Serbia in March 2024 for four inspectors.
- (c) Schedule 1 chemistry: This training component provided theoretical knowledge about the chemistry of Schedule 1 chemicals, including their physical and chemical properties, synthesis routes, decontamination, toxicological properties, and degradation pathways. Six inspectors were either certified or recertified during this mandatory course in October 2023, and 14 inspectors were certified or recertified in March 2024 in The Hague.
- (d) Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments (SSAFE): This training is required by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security for conducting missions in high-risk environments. Hostile Environment Awareness Training, provided and sponsored by Germany, and augmented by the Secretariat's certified SSAFE trainers, provided 26 Secretariat staff members—including 14 inspectors—with all the necessary modules to obtain SSAFE certification in October 2023 and February 2024.

Specialised training and exercises

- 13. Specialised training is aimed at enhancing inspectors' individual skills following initial inspector training. This training is coordinated and organised internally by the Inspectorate's CCD, but can also be delivered by external providers and tailored to OPCW needs. Exercises are organised and conducted to provide a holistic understanding of roles and responsibilities within a multidisciplinary team environment and to evaluate organic capabilities and overall preparedness.
- 14. Listed below are the relevant specialised training and exercises conducted during the reporting period:
 - (a) Self-contained breathing apparatus accreditation: This accreditation provided inspectors with the qualifications needed to operate with a self-contained breathing apparatus, which is fundamental for operating in confined environments. Eight Secretariat staff members, including six inspectors, took part in this activity at the Joint Fire Brigade Training Centre in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in June 2023.
 - (b) Mobile laboratory deployment exercise: A specialised mobile laboratory deployment exercise was conducted with the aim of practising the set-up and operation of an on-site laboratory. The exercise included setting up instrumentation and sample processing equipment, conducting sample preparation, chemical analysis, and data interpretation. The training exercise was conducted with seven analytical chemist inspectors in November 2023 at the OPCW Centre for Chemistry and Technology (the ChemTech Centre).

- (c) OPCW non-destructive evaluation testing level 1 and level 2 recertification training: Specialised theoretical and practical ultrasound and radiographic training was conducted at the ChemTech Centre in November 2023 and February 2024 for a total of five chemical weapons munitions specialist inspectors.
- (d) Forensic awareness course: This basic course, delivered by the Netherlands Forensic Institute, provided an awareness-level understanding of forensic methodologies that could be employed during an inspection, such as identifying potential forensic traces, biometric handling, photography, and decontamination of chemically contaminated biometric samples. The theoretical component of the course took place in The Hague, and the practical exercise portion was conducted in Vught, the Netherlands, for nine inspectors and three Secretariat staff members in December 2023.
- (e) Container access tool qualification: This vendor-led qualification consisted of operating and troubleshooting Monica case access equipment, which is OPCW-approved equipment for accessing and obtaining samples from sealed containers holding toxic material. Nine inspectors took part in this qualification at the ChemTech Centre in December 2023.
- (f) Analytical chemistry inspector certification: This certification course dealt with chemical analysis and reporting techniques, field-based chemical detection and identification, sampling techniques, sample preparation, the scientific principles and practical application of gas chromatography and mass spectrometry, and data analysis. Training was provided to two inspectors at the ChemTech Centre in January 2024. Additionally, during the reporting period, four analytical chemist inspectors completed their recertification to maintain operational status.
- (g) Investigative interview skills training: This training, held at the United Nations in Geneva and sponsored by the United States of America, was aimed at enhancing interview skills. The training consisted of a blend of theory and role-playing exercises relevant to the conduct of non-routine missions. Two Secretariat staff members, including one inspector, took part in February 2024.
- (h) Advanced TCT: This training was comprised of complex scenarios where proper reconnaissance, sampling, and chain-of-custody techniques were practised and evaluated in a live-agent environment. One iteration took place in Serbia for 12 inspectors in March 2024.
- (i) IAU and CI introductory training: This training provided introductory knowledge on the legal framework, OPCW standard operating procedures and OPCW operational work instructions for conducting an IAU or a CI. The training was delivered to 14 inspectors by inspection team leaders with investigative experience in April 2024.
- (j) Self-contained breathing apparatus–advanced operator: This training provided inspectors with the qualifications to conduct operations in personal protective equipment up to OPCW standard protective clothing level 8. Seven Secretariat staff members, including six inspectors, took part in this activity at the ChemTech Centre in May 2024.

- (k) Diplomatic negotiations course: This course, sponsored by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, provided the skills necessary to conduct complex negotiations through both theory and challenging role-playing scenarios. The course was delivered in The Hague to 11 inspectors in June 2023, and 12 inspectors in May 2024.
15. The Secretariat greatly appreciates the support for training opportunities in 2023 and 2024 provided by Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Serbia, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America.

Equipment and laboratories

16. Since last year's report (EC-103/DG.17), the Secretariat has kept States Parties informed of the procurement of several items of approved inspection equipment that conform to the operational requirements and technical specifications approved by the Conference of the States Parties (the Conference). The Secretariat informed the States Parties of the newly procured items of approved equipment through Notes S/2200/2023 (dated 15 August 2023), S/2219/2023 (dated 30 October 2023), and S/2278/2024 (dated 17 April 2024).
17. The OPCW Technology and Training Hub has been established at the ChemTech Centre following the relocation of the Equipment Store facility, which was previously located in Rijswijk, the Netherlands. The new facility greatly improves the ability of the Secretariat to maintain necessary supplies and equipment, to support a CI or IAU inspection team deployment within the time frames specified in the Convention, or to meet other short-notice operational requirements.
18. The Secretariat maintains two mechanisms for the analysis of collected samples in support of a CI, an IAU, or other non-routine mission: a deployable laboratory for on-site analysis operated by the Inspectorate, and a network of designated laboratories available to conduct the off-site analysis of samples. The list of designated laboratories is updated following each round of proficiency testing. The current list of laboratories designated for the analysis of authentic environmental samples can be found in Note S/2273/2024 (dated 4 April 2024). The current list of laboratories designated for the analysis of authentic biomedical samples can be found in Note S/2204/2023 (dated 24 August 2023).

Issues requiring further action by the Secretariat

Exercises

19. The planning and conduct of exercises are essential to ensuring and strengthening a response to a CI or an IAU. Although no exercises were conducted over the reporting period, table-top exercises are planned for the fourth quarter of 2024.

Issues requiring further action by States Parties

20. As mentioned in previous reports, the ability of the OPCW to respond promptly to requests for a CI or an IAU could be seriously affected by a lack of standing arrangements that require action by States Parties in accordance with Part II of the Verification Annex to the Convention (the Verification Annex). These are as follows:
- (a) In accordance with paragraph 10 of Part II of the Verification Annex, States Parties are under an obligation to provide designated OPCW inspectors with multiple-entry visas that are valid for at least two years. As at 31 May 2024, 147 States Parties (76%) had either issued, or promised to issue, two-year multiple-entry visas, or had no visa requirements for OPCW inspectors travelling with a United Nations laissez-passer (UNLP); 26 States Parties (14%) had issued multiple-entry visas valid for one year (or less); and 20 States Parties (10%) had either not responded or had provided incomplete general visa information that does not apply to OPCW inspectors travelling on UNLPs. It may be worthwhile to recall that States Parties that impose visa requirements on UNLP holders could also consider agreeing to a waiver of the standard visa requirements for UNLP holders in the event of a CI or an IAU.
 - (b) In accordance with paragraph 16 of Part II of the Verification Annex, States Parties are under an obligation to designate the points of entry that are to be used by mission teams. As at 31 May 2024, 143 States Parties had provided information regarding points of entry, whereas 50 States Parties are yet to designate points of entry.
 - (c) In accordance with paragraph 22 of Part II of the Verification Annex, States Parties are under an obligation to inform the Secretariat of the standing diplomatic clearance number (SDCN) for non-scheduled aircraft. As at 31 May 2024, 22 States Parties had provided SDCNs on a permanent basis, while 17 had provided information on expediting them in the event that a requirement arises. It should be noted that an additional 16 States Parties provide SDCNs on an annual basis.
 - (d) In accordance with paragraph 44 of Part II of the Verification Annex, inspectors shall have the right to communicate with the Headquarters of the Organisation and to use their own two-way system of communications between team members during inspections. Accordingly, States Parties must inform the OPCW of the radio frequencies available for use by the inspection teams for such purposes. As at 31 May 2024, 84 States Parties had provided frequencies or had given the Secretariat authorisation to use OPCW default frequencies, and/or had provided conditions for the use of said frequencies, or had confirmed or provided information on an expedited method for obtaining the necessary frequencies in 2024. As at the same date, 109 States Parties had not provided any records regarding radio frequencies.
21. Bilateral agreements should be further pursued between States Parties and the Secretariat for the provision of independent air transport within short notice to ensure the rapid deployment of inspection teams. States Parties' support in providing air transport and pre-approved flight clearances for non-scheduled aircraft will further solidify the Secretariat's preparedness to conduct CIs and IAUs. This is crucial in the case that commercial transport limitations are imposed, such as in areas of conflict.

22. The Secretariat continues to encourage States Parties to jointly organise and host exercises and training, or to provide training venues that can enhance the Organisation's investigative and response capabilities, specifically for inspectors and relevant Secretariat staff required for CIs or IAUs.
23. The Secretariat continues to urge States Parties to share research on technologies pertaining to personal protection equipment, medical countermeasures, identification, and decontamination regarding emerging chemical threats.

Conclusion

24. During the reporting period, the Secretariat maintained its readiness to conduct CIs and IAUs. The Secretariat will strive to adapt to emerging chemical threats and complex environments by conducting further relevant training, planning exercises, and exploring novel technologies with the support and cooperation of the States Parties.
25. As highlighted in the Director-General's report on the implementation of the tenure policy in 2021 (EC-100/DG.8/Add.1, dated 28 September 2022), the recruitment of new inspectors based on a tenure policy with a maximum of seven years continues to create challenges when planning and balancing technical specialties to ensure that the necessary skills and experience are maintained within the Secretariat. These constraints continue to apply not only to on-site verification activities, but also to training of inspectors, capacity-building activities for States Parties in the field of international cooperation and assistance, and the transfer of knowledge. As conducting CI and IAU missions requires exceptional support from various units within the Secretariat, similar institutional knowledge is deemed instrumental for the success of these missions. The impact of the tenure policy is felt broadly within the Secretariat, as it has a direct effect on succession planning, as well as the OPCW's capacity and readiness to deliver CI and IAU mandates.
26. In its decision on the rehiring of inspectors (C-27/DEC.9, dated 28 November 2022), the Conference authorised the Director-General to rehire individuals who have previously been designated as OPCW inspectors. This has allowed for the rehiring of inspectors with strong performance records who have been actively engaged in strengthening the Secretariat's readiness to conduct CIs and IAUs. The rehiring of inspectors has had a noticeable positive impact on the effectiveness of the work of the OPCW, mainly through a broader initiative to share knowledge, skills, and expertise, inter alia, in preparedness for CIs and IAUs. Maintaining and potentially expanding the rehiring capacity of the Secretariat beyond the sole body of inspectors should remain a priority for the Organisation, in particular when addressing its capacity and readiness to conduct CIs and IAUs.
27. The Secretariat reiterates its appreciation for the assistance that States Parties have contributed thus far and encourages their continuing support.